Draco Malfoy and the Mirror of Ecidyrue

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Draco Malfoy and the Mirror of Ecidyrue

by starbrigid

Summary

All it takes is one look in a mirror and an ill-advised attempt to shatter it, before an embittered Draco Malfoy fresh out of Azkaban is sent back into his body on the day he gets his Hogwarts letter.

Suddenly, Draco has an unwanted second chance, with a Sorting Hat that doesn't know what to do with him, a certain Muggleborn who won't leave his study table alone, and green eyes he just can't get out of his head. And then there's his new wand, whose choice of him could just mark him as every bit as dark a wizard as his name means he should be.

Notes

Hello all! This is another take on the old time travel cliché fic, following Philosopher's Stone, and uses some lines from the book. I hope to put my own spin on it, so please enjoy!

Warning for abuse/child abuse, violence, some self-hatred and suicidal thoughts, and descriptions of those as well as of sex acts, with a general prevalence of prejudice and Slytherin unpleasantness. Draco's head is not a very happy place to be in, especially at the start. (I do not endorse all of Draco's opinions, and this fic is not intended to be character-bashing in any corner, except from Draco's limited perspective.) BTW, this has an unfortunate lack of Britpicking as well.

Anyway, I'd love any comments or thoughts on the fic as it comes out, or your predictions where it's going to go next! Thanks for reading! :)

There is a playlist for this fic which updates with each chapter here:
The Mirror of Ecidyrue playlist

There is a translation to Russian here by DementedDuckling.

There is a translation to Spanish here by Kat_erpillar.

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 德拉科马尔福与欧斯狄律之镜 by Asuka041942

The Hogwarts Letter

It was in the moment that Harry Potter earnestly told the Wizengamot that he did not truly believe Draco Malfoy was evil that Draco began to wish Potter dead.

It was a surprisingly new feeling. Draco would have thought himself long familiar with it. For much of the past year, though, he'd wished the exact opposite. For the sake of his family, with each passing day his ancestral home was ruled by a noseless madman, there had been nothing Draco prayed for more than for Potter to be out there somewhere, ready to fulfill his destiny. To rid the world of darkness. To save it. To save *him.*

And Potter had, the world *and* Draco. From Fiendfyre, from the Dark Lord, and from Azkaban in turn, because of course Potter had taken the high road. He did the right thing no matter what. He didn't even hate Draco enough not to do that.

No, Draco had seen the way Potter looked at him with those Avada Kedavra-green eyes all through his trial. Potter was too far above him to hate him. The only thing there had been pity.

Draco wanted him dead for that pity.

For the pity that had been on his face as he waited for Draco and his mother at the door of the courtroom afterwards, not even seeming to notice all the stares on him. He'd just handed Draco back his wand without a word.

When Draco had tried to speak to him, Potter had walked away. Maybe he hadn't heard Draco. Or maybe he had.

The state of the Manor was pitiful when Draco and his mother returned to it. It had been picked all over, once by the side of dark and then by the side of light, Aurors checking it up to the minute of their arrival. Then they let his mother raise the wards again.

Except she didn't, because they were waiting for Draco to do it. His father had a true life sentence this time, so Draco was officially Lord Malfoy now.

Draco had feared his wand wouldn't work, that its allegiance would be too deeply to Potter along with the rest of the damn world's. But it raised the Manor's wards for Lord Malfoy.

Say one thing for being Lord Malfoy. The Lord was in possession of an astonishingly extensive wine cellar.

His mother gave him a wide enough berth for him to sneak down to the cellars unnoticed. She'd been eerily quiet since the Dark Lord fell. Since the Dark Lord rose again, really. Maybe they should have been celebrating their reprieve thanks to Potter's pity. Or mourning how that pity hadn't extended to Father. But despite how much time Draco had spent in his cell in Azkaban, thinking what he would say to his mother if he ever got the chance, neither

of them seemed to have much to say to each other these days, even alone and safe. Draco found his comfort in a bottle instead, as only was tradition for a Lord Malfoy.

He didn't know what he would have said to Potter if he stayed and listened. He would have been expected to thank him, for one.

"Thank you for this, Potter," Draco said to the empty stone chamber behind the wine cellar, hearing his mirthless laugh swim over the walls with the same echo that tortured screams had, when it was Aunt Bella drawing them out with particular high-pitched desperation from their prisoners. He knew himself ungrateful, knew himself as rotten as his aunt's evil corpse decaying in the ground as he laughed, "Thank you, Potter! Thank you!"

He would have to be Lord Malfoy now, set about repairing what remained of the Manor and the name attached. Not to think of the prospect of whatever future awaited the bearer of that name.

He and his mother should be more than grateful, and that was a burn worse than whisky corroding his throat. They could both be dead or in Azkaban, and yet here they were, in a Manor they had both expected claimed in reparations that hadn't even tried to, with only an insignificant portion of the Malfoy fortune even stripped. They hadn't lost anything important but Father. And Vince. And Severus, if Draco was allowed to count him, even in his own head. They were so very intact still, thanks to Potter and his mercy.

Draco *would* be Lord Malfoy tomorrow, for his mother's sake. She needed him to be strong. And he would be. Tomorrow.

Tonight, he got drunk.

He soon didn't mind the cold and discomfort of the hard floor. Azkaban had bred out a certain level of his old sensitivity to creature comforts, and any distraction was welcome from his own thoughts. He poured out an entire bottle of brandy, because it had been Vince's favorite. He watched it trickle between the stones in rivulets over the gaps and mortar, certainly more beautiful than anything in Azkaban in the enchanted candlelight. He found that if he drank quickly enough, he could keep himself from thinking at all.

He was so drunk that by the time he tried to leave the empty room, he kept falling face-first against the walls. He was trying to head back towards the wine cellar and find another bottle of whisky or brandy, this one not to pour out. But he got turned around and ended up stumbling somewhere else instead, the charmed floating candle giving up on following him.

It didn't matter, with how the next room came alive with its own light. It illuminated a huge silver mirror, radiating from the sides in a stark white halo.

This was not a surprising occurrence, stumbling upon some strange room in the Manor with what looked a mysterious magical artifact inside. It had happened at least a dozen times in his childhood in this ghastly old place, even before there had been so many intruders poking around touching things and opening doors they shouldn't. There were a number of rules and safety procedures he'd had drilled into him back then by Father, to the point they had become second nature when discovering a new object like this. But Draco was drunk and curious

enough to ignore the prompting of those instincts, justifying it to himself on the rationale that if there had been anything dangerous, the Aurors would have taken it away.

Really, he saw a mirror and wanted to look. To see some approximation of how he must have seemed to Potter outside that courtroom. A drunker approximation.

He staggered over to regard his reflection, letting the half-empty bottle drop and roll away over the old stones. He surveyed the vision he would have made, taking measure in turn of what shape he show his next two times compelled to leave the Manor anytime soon- Severus and Vince's funerals. Where he might or might not see Potter, probably not at the first and definitely not at the second. It depended on whether that noble pity extended to Potter's least favorite professor.

Severus, who from the sound of things had actually been on the side of light all along. Which made his funeral a curiously harder prospect than Vince's. It made sense for Vince to have perished in Hogwarts, the same as Aunt Bella and Voldemort, the same as it would have for Draco or his parents. But Severus had fought just as hard as Potter to take down the Dark Lord, harder no doubt in his Slytherin way, and death was his reward all the same, leaving only some ill-attended funeral to loom as the last reminder of the man who had been Draco's godfather.

It wasn't right for Potter to have saved so many, to have saved *Draco*, and fail Severus.

He hated Potter. He didn't want to see him at Severus's funeral.

He didn't want to go to Severus's funeral. He didn't want there to be a funeral, for Severus to *have* to have a funeral. Better his father or himself- or Potter, that would do quite nicely.

Merlin, he wished Potter was dead. If he could trade Potter for Severus, he would do it in a heartbeat. Or, yes, himself, if it came to it, because Severus had done what Draco couldn't. Severus was the reason Draco was here, to stare dismally at his revenant-reflection, thinking childish thoughts of aimless animosity towards Potter- instead of a life in Azkaban for slaying the great Albus Dumbledore, or an unwanted body on the Hogwarts grounds, felled by Aunt Bella for failing so completely in his duty. Severus should have lived, and Draco was too drunk not to indulge the notion that it was Potter's fault he hadn't. That if Potter had just wanted it enough, if he tried hard enough, he could have saved Severus from the Dark Lord, just like he saved Draco from Fiendfire.

Both of Draco's arms wrapped around Potter desperately to hold on as the broom hurtled forward, the marked arm clinging as tight as the unmarked one.

He couldn't stand his reflection for too long. His gaze strayed to the silver edge of the mirror, whose abstract etchings bore the impression of luminous letters overtop the crenellation-like border. Draco read them aloud, puzzling out the message rather slowly, with his mind addled, and every word broken up by another of the same symbol- a triangle with a circle inside with a line through it in turn, though only the circle was glowing along with the letters. He squinted at the word *Ecidyrue*, and read it out phonetically. "Eh-SID-eh-rue." It was gibberish past it, *Llehfo tuokcabb mil cyamen oylno,* but gibberish the mirror had lit up quite brightly

between those triangles. That gibberish was far more attractive than his post-Azkaban reflection.

Potter had given Draco back his wand, which left him free to throw any hex he liked at the offending mirror. Perhaps Potter would be pleased if he knew that the first thing Draco did with this wand after it killed the Dark Lord would be to curse his own reflection.

"Finestra maxima," Draco snarled. He had to try there times before there was any effect. But on that third try, he saw the light erupt from his wand and spark in the glass before it shattered it. Except there was only the sound of a mirror breaking, sight of light splintering across the surface in patterns of cracks like sparks disappearing underwater, without anything falling from a surface as smooth as an undisturbed lake.

Before the shattering gave way to nothing, he heard the sound of the cracking glass, louder than it should have been for the charm, turn to a lilting melody, like a lullaby. Something, perhaps, a bit like the incantation Severus had hummed to heal Draco after Potter cut him open on the floor.

But it was more beautiful, the song, for the fleeting moment Draco could hear, before his vision itself was shattering in an infinite succession of breaking reflections, one after another superimposed until they were bright enough to burn everything in him to blackness.

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Draco's first thought when he woke was surprise he didn't feel any hangover, though the headache or nausea might swarm in as soon as he stood up. His second thought was that he hoped his mother didn't realize he'd passed out in their cellars. Beyond how unseemly it was, he had rather hoped their days of people sleeping rough down here were at an end.

He picked himself to his feet, looking around the room blearily, and reached for his wand to light it. He checked every pocket and he couldn't find it. Nor did he see any signs, strangely enough, of the other thing he remembered in this room beside himself, some kind of large silver mirror. Had he left his wand upstairs somewhere? Even by his own recent standards, losing his wand before a full day was gone since Potter gave it back was impressive.

Unless it had somehow been summoned back to Potter's side. Or left on its own accord, not that Draco had ever heard such a thing was possible. But Potter was the Chosen One. He could do anything. And who could blame a wand for wanting to stay with Potter over Draco? Not like that made sense. He hadn't made much sense to even himself recently.

His thoughts were rambling and undisciplined as he picked his way out of the cellars, looking around for any sign of his mother or house elves to give away his newest small sin of passing out down here. He was lucky enough not be hungover or even feel stiffness in his limbs from sleeping on stone, but his luck ran out on avoiding elves by the time he had climbed the stairs into the house and come face to face-

With Dobby the house elf. The dead one.

"What are you doing here?" Draco blurted, thinking of how long the elf had been freed. His mind produced Potter's steady voice at the Wizengamot breaking only when his story of his brief capture at Malfoy Manor got to Dobby's death. In order to exculpate Draco, he'd told of how Draco refusing to recognize him had saved his life, in a grim sojourn to the Manor that ended with the impaling, by a thrown knife of Draco's lovely aunt's, of his rescuer Dobby. Potter had said he'd buried Dobby. With his own hands, like a squib too poor to afford a gardener.

He hadn't seemed to say it to show off what a great person he was- even to a misty-eyed Granger, who everyone knew had all kinds of bizarre ideas about the creatures. He'd seemed in a trance of memory, caught in a compulsion of recollection to tell the world the story not of Draco's bravery- not that there had been any- but of some dead elf's.

Who, from the sound of it, had been the one to actually save Harry Potter.

It was a miracle Potter's fumbling attempts to save Draco had worked. Such a Gryffindor.

Or apparently not so much, if that sob story about burying this elf was a lie.

"So you're alive. Did Potter send you?" Draco said, only to hear his voice come out high and squeaky. Maybe he'd drank some strange kind of booze last night. His voice hadn't cracked like that in years. "What does he want, then?"

Dobby frowned up at Draco with a confusion rather rich from someone Saint Potter had convinced the world was a martyr. "Dobby is not understanding Master Draco, sir."

Draco felt himself blinking rapidly. What had been in that booze? "Why are you calling me master anyway?"

"Master Draco is Dobby's master," Dobby said in further confusion. Say what you would about the ambience of Azkaban, at least it had meant a vacation from house elves asking unnecessary questions. "Why is Master Draco saying-"

"You're a free elf, aren't you?" Draco interrupted impatiently. He wanted to ask Dobby why he wasn't dead, but it was beneath his dignity already to be arguing with a house elf. "You don't have a master, right?"

Dobby's face when he stared up at Draco then was more expressive than Draco ever remembered on a house elf, some terrible mix of emotions he hadn't expected. "Dobby is not free, Dobby serves Master Lucius and Master Draco and Mistress Narcissa," Dobby said, in a whisper that sought not to be overheard, conspiratorial but somehow wistful. "But Dobby would like to be free someday."

It figured Saint Potter would mistreat his house elves. Or the creature just didn't like his new master going around crying about how dead he was. "Do you have any message from Potter?"

"No, Master Draco-"

"Then let me pass," he hissed, only to hear his mother's voice calling his name.

Draco brushed past, hungry enough to follow her voice to the dining room. His robes as he smoothed them down didn't feel rumpled, and Mother hadn't seemed in a state of mind recently to notice he had on the same robes as yesterday.

Breakfast at home. He had never thought he'd see the day again. Before Potter had taken up the case, part of him had expected he'd live until the end of his days breakfasting with Dementors. But here he was, with his mother's impatient voice once again summoning him for breakfast, in the great formal crystal dining room as it had been before the Manor became no longer their own. As if he could step into the past. As if Father would be there waiting impatiently too, and not in the cell Potter refused to save him from-

Father was, sitting at the head of the table with a copy of the Daily Prophet, as healthy and superior-looking as Draco had ever seen him.

"Father?" Draco breathed. He rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was hallucinating, only for Father to gesture imperiously at what had been Draco's usual seat at his left side. Draco's feet took him there automatically, a numbness spreading through all his senses separately like a dream evaporating in reverse, until his mother's voice made all the feeling go out of him at once and leave nothing but fear.

"It's your Hogwarts letter, Draco," she said excitedly, sounding more carefree than he had ever thought he would hear her again.

Slowly, with shaking hands, Draco carefully ripped open the letter. He remembered tearing it so hard the first time he nearly tore the letter as well. It was intact this time, but the words were no different.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Malfoy,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Draco stared at the letter until his father snorted derisively. "Don't act so shocked, Draco. As poor as your magic is for a Malfoy of your age, do you think I could be on the board of directors and my son wouldn't get into Hogwarts?"

Draco's index finger ran out to trace over the words that were there in black fountain ink, in McGonagall's crisp handwriting from Transfiguration blackboards and this same letter, once upon a time. There it was, the most impossible combination- *Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore.*

"May I see the paper, Father?" Draco asked calmly, which did not seem to be the reaction his parents had been expecting, after the amount of paling and shriveling he must just have done. Father handed over his copy of the Prophet, while house elves placed their eggs hollandaise before them, runny and with turmeric just as Father liked. Draco had always thought it looked like they were ingesting bubotuber pus, but Father had taught him to keep such opinions to himself.

He couldn't believe how good it tasted, the inane runniness of egg and sauce, the crisp snap of the English muffin beneath the egg and bacon and sauce, the familiar annoyance of the turmeric clouding the breakfast taste. There it was. Eggs just the way Father liked them.

The headline was nothing to do with the War. Draco couldn't remember the last time that had happened. Nothing about Muggleborn Registration or Death Eater attacks or Harry Potter sightings or the Dark Lord's threats. Only a smiling image of Gilderoy Lockhart triumphant over some great dead chimerical beast in the vast wild of what was labeled as Zanzibar- LOCKHART POPS POPOBAWA!

Underneath the date of July 24, 1991.

The paper fell from his hands. He replaced it with his Hogwarts letter, plucked from his mother's hands none too politely. "I have to go," Draco told them, "I'm sorry," and staggered towards the door.

"Come back here, Draco," Father ordered, and Draco ignored him.

"Draco, you haven't eaten," Mother called.

"I hate those bubotuber pus eggs!" Draco yelled at the top of his voice, after having already vacantly shoved both English muffins into his mouth like a starved Hippogriff. He raced out of the dining room, nearly knocking Dobby over in the process. "Sorry," he told the little obstruction, in case this mutant of a house elf still somehow belonged to Potter, and this wasn't what he was beginning to fear it was.

Draco's voice had never sounded so bratty. Or so high.

He found his room, but it was not his room. There was a large dragon decal on the door, which would light up neon in the dark, and crawl around letting off heatless flames. He'd taken it off in the summer of third or fourth year when he decided it was too childish. Or maybe it had been the summer after Father first went to Azkaban, when Draco had systematically rid his room of everything that didn't befit a grown man ready to fight for his family.

Except his stuffed dragon. Imoogi had still been there upon his return to the Manor last night, before he had broken his two-year parole in what he was beginning to suspect was a singularly spectacular fashion. He had kept her hidden in his closet, and a quick look last night had confirmed she was still there, though covered in dust, but he hadn't taken her out.

Imoogi had been a gift from Aunt Andromeda, back when Mother still spoke to her. Aunt Andromeda had told Draco the story of an Asian dragon called Imoogi, who was a girl in human form until she turned 17. That you could tell who she was and what she would become by the mark in the shape of a dragon on her shoulder. Draco had such a mark, hence the name suggestion, and hence his own name being Draco instead of Lucius as the first name Father had initially wanted.

There had been the smallest part of himself, in that bleak June he turned 17 mere days after watching Dumbledore fall from the tower, bitter that the birthmark hadn't meant what it should and turned him to a dragon.

He'd heard later of one of Potter's escapades riding a guard dragon out of Gringotts as well. There could be worse things to end up as, he had thought lazily in his small cocoon of terror of his childhood bed with his illicit radio- worse things than ending up as something ridden by Potter.

The offending dragon lay on his unmade bed beside his pillow, on top of sheets that were no longer plain green but silver with golden snitches. Imoogi had not a speck of dust on her, and had not yet lost her little baby dragon tooth necklace. Her long green body with its red spikes coiled over the snitches, with a stiffness to the red horns, and a plushness to the red underbelly that Draco could hardly believe she had used to have. If a toy could look young, she looked young.

Except she looked much as expected in comparison, when her reflection was beheld in Draco's floor-length gilded bedroom mirror, in the arms of Draco's own.

Young would be a mild word for how Draco looked. But then, the date on the Prophet had already told him what he was. 11, to be precise.

He might as well have been a house elf himself, from the look of him. He could not believe he had ever used to be so short.

He threw the stuffed dragon onto the bed and searched frantically through half of the obnoxious drawers full of obnoxious children's robes, before he remembered he wouldn't even have a wand yet. That was, if it was his own mind and not the world around him that lied about the time he should be in. He would get one days later in Diagon Alley, when Father took him there for school supplies. The day he met Harry Potter.

Typical Potter. Somehow, he'd managed to ruin Draco's life before he ever even met him.

Reaching out and touching his reflection did little to convince Draco that the image in the mirror before him was his own. He remembered his own 18-year-old face in some other mirror, pieces and small fragments in his memory of a brilliantly lit silver mirror with some sort of symbols and etchings, but it was a rapidly fading unreality, save for the wondering recollection that he'd cast a shattering charm and that it had shattered and yet not shattered-

That was hardly the most paradoxical thing currently facing him.

A magic mirror had sucked him into the past. Right on the nose of the day he got his Hogwarts letter. Or he had gone mad. It was hard to tell which would be preferable.

On the day Potter gave him back his wand. This had to somehow be Potter's fault.

Dobby had been acting suspicious. Maybe Dobby was in on it.

Far more likely this was some elaborate illusion or hallucination, than an actual successful instance of traveling into the past. Time travel was real, of course, but he'd never heard about someone traveling into their own body- only the whole body going, not just consciousness. And he'd used to be obsessed with things like this, in a three-month or so phase at age ten, convinced he would grow up to be an Unspeakable before Father had quite literally beaten the idea out of him. More likely he had been cursed and Mother was frantic in the real world trying to get him help, or he had gone battier than Aunt Bella and was trying to reckon all this out strapped down to a comfortable fluffy bed in St. Mungo's, while orderlies around him pretended to care about the barmy Death Eater.

Death Eater-

Draco pushed up the left sleeve of his robe in one frantic jerk of laughably small hands, and his child's pale white wrist was empty. The snake and skull were gone.

Perhaps insanity was preferable to sanity after all.

The Talon Wand

It took writing to get Draco's thoughts into any semblance of order, though he was paranoid enough to want to burn each sheet after he finished. He would have if he had his wand back. By all appearances, his mind had been hurled back to his 11-year-old body, which made the most likely suspects for this nonsensical occurrence time travel or psychotic break. Either would likely constitute breakage of his parole. Who knew where he was or what his body was doing if this was all in his head? And what if he really had escaped to the past, and returned to a team of Aurors, demanding an explanation for sinister spells detected at Malfoy Manor? What would he tell the Wizengamot if hauled ignominiously back before them, with no Saint Potter to plead for him this time? *Sorry, I didn't* mean *to skip out on my two years of law-ordered monitoring on the first night I was out, by the means of mysterious and quite probably dark magic. I just happened to get sloshed and start cursing an enchanted mirror.*

He wrote the two possibilities at the top of the sheet, *Actual time travel* and *Madness*, then he put *Enchanted/cursed into false reality* as a third category, rather than making it a subcategory of *Madness.* He drew a line beneath them all and wrote *Problems- Have broken parole- does going seven years in the past count as leaving the country in the next two year span?*

He added, *No wand again. Potter's fault.*

Draco had always heard that the way time travel worked was that the past was unchangeable. That there was only one timeline in actuality, two ends of a string folded to meld together and make one as if they had never been disparate. All the changes the time traveler made in their trip had already happened in their own past. There was never any change to events that the traveler apprehended as past.

Draco knew that much, and that you were forbidden from meeting or interacting with your past self. Did possessing him with your mind count?

This couldn't work by those rules. Already, this was irreparably different from the scenario he had learned with such interest as a child, captivated by its simplistic and yet byzantine elegance. It was different because he was different, an 18-year-old in an 11-year-old head, and knew things he hadn't known, to the point he couldn't possibly act the exact way he had the first time. So he wrote *Time travel paradoxes*, and his head threatened to explode from how much he didn't understand.

But he did have to think of this as time travel. If he was enchanted or mad, he could trust to those outside his mind to free him from it. That was how these sorts of trances or fugues worked. As stupid as it felt, he had to proceed along the assumption of being in his body in 1991, because the consequences could be far graver than ignoring the other possibilities. A subcategory of *Time travel paradoxes* was *Screwing up the past.*

Wasn't that always the risk of time travel? Unless this was some alternate universe. He couldn't know whether it was the same reality, whether he was actually a virtual seer with

foreknowledge of seven years to come. For all he knew, the world could behave differently than he remembered from here on out. But if it didn't, and there was only one world he was redoing, how could he not make it unfold wrong, unfold worse, more than just Father in prison and Severus and Vince dead- he could doom his mother, his fellow Slytherins, *himself*- Harry Potter-

If he changed too much, Potter might never win them the war. Voldemort might never fall.

Even if the slimy old poser hadn't, strictly speaking, risen yet.

Draco couldn't handle this. If the last two years of life had proved anything to him, humbling and mortifying as it was, it was how unfit he was to be making decisions of even the slightest consequence. His feet took him towards the cellars, which he found locked off. He should have looked around when he woke down there in what he had thought the same room, the mirror removed or not visible in the darkness. But he had never considered it would not be open on a return.

He reached for his wand to try unlocking charms. It should rightly open for the Lord of the Manor. Except he wasn't Lord Malfoy anymore, and he didn't have a wand either. He almost went to find his mother to demand she open the doors for him. But he could hardly explain he needed to find a magic silver mirror to climb back inside. Could he?

If he wanted to end up in St. Mungo's in his hallucination *and* reality.

It wouldn't help that the chamber was somewhere past the wine cellars but not in any location he could remember, perhaps not even the room he happened upon it before. With the number of times the house elves had caught him and Theo trying to sneak into the wine cellars a good seven, eight years ago- no, one year ago now, that was worse- there was no way his parents would buy he wasn't just after adult drinks to impress his friends.

"Alohomora," he said softly, and then louder with an impatient wave of his hand, though his 11-year-old voice sounded ridiculously high and thin. *Let me in,* he willed the cellar door. *Let me go and do the right thing for once, let me go back before I ruin the past.*

He had never been any good at wandless magic.

"Dobby," Draco said several times, until the elf appeared with a pop by his side, regarding the closed door with trepidation.

"Dobby," Draco said, trying to sound as grown-up as he could, "Open the cellars for me."

Dobby frowned. "Master Draco is not being allowed in the cellars, Mistress Narcissa says."

Draco gritted his teeth. "I was down there before. You saw me there. Just let me back in."

He had sunken to negotiating with a house elf. A defective one at that. If this was Potter's doing and he was watching somewhere, somehow, he had to be laughing his ass off at Draco-

Please. As if Potter cared enough- had ever cared enough, to waste his time with anything this elaborate against *Draco*.

"Master Draco is not allowed," Dobby repeated stubbornly, and Draco considered seeing how much of a beating the creature could take, before he decided to take a more creative interpretation of Father's rules. But then, these creatures were that odd sort that beat themselves worse than their masters ever did, masochists but not at all in the fun way, and besides, where would it leave Saint Potter if Draco maimed his precious house elf before he could ever free him?

Draco heaved a sigh and put on his nicest vacant Gryffindor face before he bent down to look the elf in the eye. "Okay, Dobby. I understand. I don't want to get you in trouble. But I need your help. Please."

Dobby did look rather moved. Draco hadn't known these things had such a range of emotional expression. Perhaps they should have been having them put on theatrical productions in their spare time. "Master Draco is different today. He is saying that Dobby should be a free elf," he said uncertainly, and sure, Draco would let him take that stupid interpretation if it got him at that mirror. "Master Draco is being kind to Dobby now. Dobby wants to help Master Draco."

Draco almost offered him freedom in exchange for his help, a promise he planned to be too far in the future with Dobby too free and also too dead by then to fulfill. But there was no guarantee the mirror or even a clue would be there to find. And so much as freeing a house elf, as it turned out, would likely have serious consequences. What kind of a terrible world was it where he couldn't so much as kick a house elf, without worrying it would bring the Wizarding world's future savior to his future knobby knees?

"Dobby," Draco said finally, "Do you think you could help me get a wand? Could you find any around the Manor? There's so many magical things in so many rooms no one ever goes in." Draco tried for guile, though bending to the level of a house elf was beginning to make him feel almost as bilious as the hangover he had expected. "I thought there might be one in the cellars, but if you know where another one is, you have to tell me. I'll be getting my own wand in a few days anyway. I just want to get in a bit more practice first, so I'm good enough at magic when I get to Hogwarts. Could you look for one and bring it? Or at least tell me where I could find it?"

Dobby's eyes as he regarded Draco with swimming doubt were at once the same irritating eyes he had grown up seeing, and a pair of scales that held the weight of the future in them.

At last, Dobby nodded. "Dobby knows. Dobby will show Master Draco the Talon Wand."

Draco didn't like wands with names. But he couldn't think of anything but to follow, down hallway after hallway until his short legs were dragging beneath him. He complained halfheartedly until they walked into yet another gilded but dilapidated room in antique style, and Dobby made an expansive gesture towards the center.

Dobby lit the room with a snap of his fingers, and the violet-and-charcoal chandelier came to life over a glass case full of artifacts. The obvious attraction was the nasty-looking old sword, a long jagged katana-like blade wrought in what looked like ebony and jade alongside dark steel. There were several no doubt-enchanted coins that surrounded it in a ring like a summoning circle, along with pieces of jewelry in Slytherin shades of green and silver, but

the plainest thing in the case aside from the old leather diary beside it was also what he was looking for: a long wand in plain dark wood, ugly beside its companions. It was almost broken-looking, with a long curved handle that gave way to a shorter blunted point, at a bent angle like a faulty dagger. There was something familiar to that off-putting shape. Perhaps it was held in one of the portraits at the Manor, or in a picture in a book. It had to be very ancient to be left in this case, only magically prevented from gathering the dust of centuries over its gnarled surface.

When Dobby gestured and again called it the Talon Wand, Draco could see why it was called that, its end something like the curved nails at the points of a hawk's talon, or an owl's even, if you weren't trying to sound impressive about it. It could be, say, a chicken's. But no one wanted to wield the Chicken Wand. It could be plain and ugly as it wanted to be, it could be half-broken, its real name even could be the bloody Chicken Wand, as long as it got Draco back into that godforsaken mirror.

Draco touched the glass. "Is it open? Open it."

Dobby was looking hesitant and rather queasy. "Master Draco is wanting a wand, and Dobby only knows of this one, but Master Draco should know this wand is-"

"Whatever," Draco said, waving Dobby's blabbering aside with what he thought unusual magnanimity. "I don't care. Get it for me. Can't your magic open the glass?" When Dobby just looked up at him with huge pathetic eyes like great glass marbles, Draco's remaining patience evaporated.

"Finestra," Draco hissed, snapping his empty hand in the glass's direction with all his frustration crystallizing in the motion, and only realized when he saw the glass shatter that he should have checked first if there were any dark curses on the case. He should have learned after just getting into trouble with another unknown artifact. Maybe that had been what Dobby was trying to warn him about, but either way, Draco found he didn't care overmuch. If it cursed him, if it struck him dead where he stood, well, that saved him the trouble of getting back to the future, or figuring out what he had to do with those long pointless years that awaited the venerable old name of Lord Malfoy.

The wand fit well enough in his hand, though he had to adjust his grip a couple times and move his fingers to remember how to place shorter digits, on a unique shape of wand at that. Once he had it, though, a mere wave sent dark sparks fizzling in the air and sending glittering reflections over the pool of broken glass at him and Dobby's feet, congealed bursts of shadow like freezing smoke. The magic was potent enough to make the hair on his arms stand up, and an aftershock curl to his toes and leave them warm in their leather shoes over faded glass-embedded ancestral carpets. This would do. This would do quite well.

Draco tossed one of his papers into the air over the shards and called, "Incendio!" Both he and Dobby leaped back as flame erupted into the air from Draco's hands up all the way to the vault-like ceiling, chandeliers just missed by the blast but swaying from the near waves.

It didn't seem his magic was weaker back in his 11-year-old body. Far from it. Maybe it had traveled with him, not that it mattered given how quickly he meant to be getting out of here. It seemed he only had 11-year-old control, or else this wand was just more powerful than he

was used to. He would have to be careful. He'd been using his mother's for so long since Potter had stolen his. A proper wand to respond to him was a dangerous luxury.

No curses yet that he could ascertain. Perhaps whatever protections on the case- there were some enchantments, at least, to judge by the lack of dust- didn't work on members of the family. Or maybe he was about to drop dead any second and leave the problem of securing a Malfoy heir entirely to his parents. At this point, Mother wasn't anywhere near too old, was she? Granted, it would require his parents to spend entirely too much time actually interacting to be ideal for them, but such sacrifices had to be made to maintain the ancient old Wizarding bloodlines. Perhaps if it was another boy, they could name this one Lucius.

"Sorry," Draco said, forcing a smile to calm the shaken elf. "That was, er, good work, Dobby. It's fine. See? Incendio," he cast, visualizing the area he wanted the flame to take in the air, before throwing the remaining pages and burning them. The flame only went a little broader in the air than he intended before fizzling out. "No harm done. No need to tell my parents, understand?" He let his voice turn haughty and cruel, a tone that had grown less natural in the past year, and more a mask to put on. After he had been forced to perpetrate actual cruelty on Rowle and so many others, its once-pleasant taste seemed to turn to ashes in his mouth. But he had learned how to fake it, and he performed it quite nicely for an 11-year-old. "I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you, just because you helped one of your masters do a little extra preparation for Hogwarts. Would you want that, Dobby?" Those rapidly blinking marble eyes made him fear he was being too subtle. "Tell them and I'll punish you. Keep quiet and I'll reward you. Is that clear?"

"Dobby is not saying anything," Dobby said firmly, and disappeared with that house elf pop that Draco had strangely come to miss in the months in Azkaban. Better one of these little vermin underfoot than a Dementor in attendance. Sometimes, Draco had wondered in those long weeks alone in his cell, feeling the cold around and inside, how his father could have mustered such enthusiasm for decimating the Muggles, when it seemed so clear the world would be better served by exterminating all Dementors.

"Reparo," Draco cast, and guided the shards one by one to re-form the case around the other artifacts. He didn't know what any of them were, so he resisted the temptation to touch them, even the diary which looked harmless, or that sword so deliciously serpentine, it seemed a crime to leave it unseen and unused. But Draco wasn't Neville bloody Longbottom. He didn't even know how to use a damn sword.

Draco soon came to like his new wand. It was easy to use, the only difficulty how powerful the spells came out if he wasn't consciously trying to control them- as if it had been dormant too long, waiting for a Malfoy to take it in hand and let it show what it was capable of. A foolish part of Draco hoped he could take this wand with him into the future, or else find it where Dobby had led today. And if he ever saw Potter again, he would use this wand in front of him, so he could see Draco hadn't even needed his stupid charity giving Draco's old wand back. Draco was a Malfoy. Malfoys gave charity. They didn't accept it.

Especially not from filthy homely half-starved half-witted half-blood Harry Potters, who Draco would tell to stick that old wand where an ill-bred animal like Potter would only be so lucky to have any other sort of wand shoved up in him-

Focus, Draco, the Severus he carried in his head berated him. *How are you letting yourself get distracted by such insignificant rubbish? Are you a Slytherin or a Hufflepuff?*

The cellars opened to a whispered Alohomora, lit to a whispered Lumos, but his luck ran out when it came to finding what he wanted. He visually cataloged each door before beginning his exploration, and found the room he had awoken in by the handful of white blond hairs shining up from its stones, but no mirror or any sign something that big had been there.

Foolishly, the sight of the light strands on cold black, from a person having slept there, made him think of Luna Lovegood sprawled out on a floor like this in their cellars, awakening from sleep with a mildness to her smile he had never understood, saying, "Hello, Draco. Is there any food for me today?"

Draco stalked through room after room getting madder and madder, but eventually he had to check the dungeons proper. Those threatened to bring back worse memories than sneaking meals to Lovegood. He was only too grateful when he heard the distant sound of Mother calling him for dinner. He climbed the stairs, concluding that the mirror had disappeared, or else gone somewhere above ground. When he caught sight of Dobby picking up the dishes after dinner, he went over and ordered in a conspiratorial whisper to see if there was any mirror of that description in the Manor. Dobby said he knew of no such mirror, but that he would check, only for subsequent reports to reaffirm its absence.

No, there was no mirror like he remembered from the night the Wizengamot pardoned him. He tried facing himself in other mirrors in various rooms, even his own, and shattering them, but all that gave him was the onerously repetitive task of repairing each mirror in turn, and sometimes his own hands or face from shards that had flown at him. Even independent of the insipid yellow-haired cherub that greeted him each morning as his farcical reflection, he was beginning to nourish an unhealthy hatred of mirrors.

On the second day, he went up to Mother's side after Father had left breakfast and, mindful of any house elves overhearing, timidly asked, "Can I tell you something, Mother?"

"Anything, my dear Draco," she told him, with a lightness in her manner that made her almost seem a stranger. His father had not changed half so much. He did not seem to feel suffering the way his mother did.

"I have to tell you," Draco began, and stopped, tongue heavy in his mouth. She wouldn't believe him. Or at least it would take a long time to prove he wasn't just making up stories for attention, before the events he foretold came to pass- if they did unfold the same- and even then, she would at best think him a seer who was a bit mental to boot. "Never mind," he finished, and sprinted back to his room. He barely resisted the urge to send real fire at the dragon on his door, when its harmless fireworks sparkled unpleasantly in his eyes on the way past them.

Options to tell, Draco wrote on the top of another soon-to-be-burned piece of parchment. *Father, Mother. Both or separately.* And then, as uneasy as the creeping thought that had begun to pervade him, the dead: *Severus, Dumbledore.* Those had the disadvantage of waiting until he made it to Hogwarts to tell them, and the advantage of not being his parents. He could send off a letter if he really wanted, especially to his own godfather, but it would be

hard enough to make anyone believe him in person, let alone in writing, so he realistically had to wait. He thought of adding fellow Slytherins, *Vince, Greg, Blaise, Theo, Pansy, Millie,* a parade of names also embedded with an undead one, but their disadvantage was that they were also eleven now.

There was only one more option to put on the list, and it was the last one. *No one.*

If he had been his 11-year-old self, he would have gone straight to Father if he was in this much trouble, and at once spilled everything and expected him to make it all perfectly right.

But that was the thing. Father couldn't make everything right anymore. Most of the time, all he did was make things worse.

And Mother would just go to Father. And she wouldn't stop Father from doing what he wanted, not about anything.

Draco elected the option of Severus, even if that might have been from selfishly wanting to see him alive one more time, and just as selfishly not wanting to speak to Dumbledore. Severus would believe Draco and keep him from wrecking everything. Maybe it would take some time to research. Draco wasn't naive enough to think anyone could just snap his fingers and fix this. But Severus would keep the past safe, and eventually, he would succeed and send Draco back. Maybe Draco wouldn't even have to tell him about the future. Maybe Severus wouldn't want to know, or maybe Draco could be vague or lie.

Severus was a skilled Legilimens, as well as one of the best Occlumens in Britain if not the world. But Draco had spent a lot of time practicing Occlumency with other Death Eaters, chiefly Aunt Bella. Maybe his skills, paltry in comparison to Severus's, would hold if they resided in an underestimated child. And even if Severus did see- if Draco wanted help, someone might have to know about what he had done. What Severus had done, purportedly by Dumbledore's orders or not. He didn't want to tell on Severus to anyone but Severus. If he did, Father for one would use it to his advantage to no end. He wouldn't want to send Draco back, not without pumping him for every bit of information he had, so then Father could ruin the future anyway.

And Draco couldn't face Dumbledore, so it was Severus as the endpoint he looked towards, while spending the days searching the Manor for a mirror he was growing increasingly convinced he would never find. Until he could speak alone with Severus, he would just have to keep his head down, avoid arousing suspicion, and do everything he could to avoid changing the past.

Which meant staying away from Harry Potter entirely.

The Boy Who Lived

Draco remembered the day he met Potter easily enough, because it was the day his parents were already planning to take him to Diagon Alley. Draco pleaded and pleaded to go a day or two earlier, secretly to avoid Potter, but they seemed too used to his whining to give in and shift their schedules. It had them going a week after he had arrived to find his Hogwarts letter, which meant a whole week of wrestling with the urge to tell someone. It was a measure of how unhinged and desperate Draco found himself becoming in the privacy of his own head, that for a split second, it occurred to him to use the Imperius Curse to get his parents to keep him away from Potter.

After all, he had found that with his new wand, he could use that curse.

He had gone back to the cellars during one of his repeated searches of the same area, hoping for some miraculous apparition, and the sight of spiders had made him remember Mad-Eye Moody's demonstrations in fourth year. He hadn't scrupled within the safely warded walls of the Manor to repeat those demonstrations, testing his magic, and ensure he had full command of the wand should he have need of it. Though he had to admit to himself that using the Imperius on his parents to make them go to Diagon Alley earlier didn't really qualify.

He used it on the largest spider he found, enchanted candles hovering over the ugly purple-black insect, with its myriad compound eyes that seemed to cloud once Draco's enchantment descended. He willed it to dance and watched it obey, with a sick feeling in his gut that made him stop as soon as he could while being sure the curse had worked. He held the spider in place petrified, hearing his breath come out ragged in the chiller underground air, and let it go only when he was ready to cast the Cruciatus curse. The spider's writhing then left no doubt that a new wand and new body hadn't made his abilities at dark magic atrophy. Draco released it and watched it scurry haltingly away with the taste of acid in his mouth.

He practiced a lot of other spells after to wipe the slate clean, should the wand be checked for some reason for past use. He would soon have his own wand back in this time, the old reliable unicorn hair one. Earlier than the last time, since the change he had managed to prevail on Mother to make was to let him go to Ollivander's first- ostensibly out of over-excitement to get a wand- and thereby avoid Potter at Madam Malkin's. He wouldn't be using either wand in this time period for very long. And yet with each hour that passed as an undetected intruder, it felt more irrationally vital for him to be capable of defending himself.

When he cast Sectumsempra on the next spider that happened by, with his compliments to Potter, the individual feathery legs segmented unevenly off, with a pooling of blood over stone and then gradual stillness like he might as well have cast Avada Kedavra.

He ran through every spell he could think of in those dark empty hours that seemed to stretch magically long, dragged out like saltwater taffy refusing to pull apart between Vince's grubby hands. He didn't ask to visit any of his friends, even the living Vince, and avoided his parents as much as possible save at dinner, but they didn't seem to notice anything. It was almost distressingly easy to fool them. And then it was back to the cellars, casting endless

meaningless sequences of Flitwick's charms year by year in hovering candlelight, or to his room writing down aimless ponderings of his situation to burn and leave him banishing smoke and ashes. When the day to go to Diagon Alley arrived, he had little trouble mustering up most of the feverish anticipation he had held the first time. Even if there was something unpleasantly hysterical in his excitement, his parents didn't notice.

Diagon Alley hadn't been this bustling and colorful for years, though Azkaban hadn't exactly left Draco with ample chances to go out on the town. For all he knew, post-war restoration had been so quick that there was already just as much chatter and clamor and laughing children back in his time. He scowled at the first-years running around shrieking about new cauldrons and broomsticks making a nuisance of themselves, thinking Diagon Alley had been better in that dark time without so many children around. He wished he could wave a spell to banish all the children from a five-block radius, only to remember that he himself happened to be a child.

Father insisted on stopping in Knockturn Alley before anything else, which left him standing outside Borgin & Burkes for a stretch of time alongside Mother, trying to remember whether this delay had happened the first time, and whether putting up with it made it more or less likely he would run into Potter after all.

Imperius did remain a possibility.

Once they finally made it to Ollivander's, though, after all of Draco's whining and poking and prodding about it, he found himself unable to step through the door. He thought for a paralyzed eternity that there was some magic keeping him out, that something in the wards or the building or the old man inside could sense the boy trying to walk in was a dark wizard who had helped wreck this centuries-old shop and lock its owner in his family dungeons. But no, it was just Draco's own feet. A shove to his back with Father's cane sent him stumbling over the threshold easily enough.

Draco had thought Ollivander looked hideous and old and decrepit the first time he saw him, but compared to how he'd been after a couple of weeks at Malfoy Manor, this Ollivander was so fresh-faced and undamaged that Draco could have thought him some younger brother or nephew. But it was Ollivander, and he had wands for the Malfoy boy to try, while Mother and Father hovered right beside like they could somehow will Draco's magic into responding to a better one than the ten inch hawthorn wood with unicorn hair he was surely going to get.

It had been the first wand he tried before, and so it was again. It felt familiar in his hand, an afterimage of the wood suffused through with what he had imagined Potter's lingering warmth, though it was bigger in this smaller palm. He felt a too-brief surge of gladness before his eyes registered the lack of any surge of magic. There was nothing in the shop but a boy holding a still wand and three adults watching like they were liable at any moment to look at his trembling hand and see he was an imposter, preparing to begin attending a school he had already opened to the forces of darkness.

"No?" Ollivander mused, looking surprised, more at the total lack of response than an imperfect match. "How about this one? Ten inches, hornbeam and unicorn hair. Quite rigid." The sense of loss Draco had felt watching his old wand put back into its box, like Potter had showed up to take it back from him, was doubled when he grasped the wand and again, there

wasn't a spark. Nor could he feel any thrum of magic, only the same blankness as if it had been driftwood.

"What's wrong with him?" Father hissed, looming over the proceedings, and Ollivander did not look flustered quite yet, but rather perturbed. "Give him a better one. He'll want something stronger like mine. Dragon heartstring. Elm." He rattled it off as if Ollivander wasn't known to remember every wand he'd ever sold, and produced his own wand from his walking stick with its silver snake at the end. Draco had used to covet and admire that wand and stick, but could only find it embarrassing now. How could he not, after Voldemort had snapped the ornate useless decoration off it, once Father meekly handed it away to him? "My wife also has dragon heartstring. Dragon heartstring and redwood. Try something like that. He takes after his father."

And now Draco also had to be embarrassed that Father was trying to tell bloody Ollivander how to do his job. Ollivander tried two more unicorn hair cores to no result before switching to dragonheart at Father's continued complaints, only for the same null effect to ensue. Draco could see the concern in Mother's eyes, before she cast a nervous glance around the shop to make sure no one was seeing what was becoming a shameful display. *It's not my fault I'm from the future,* he wanted to tell them, trying to summon up the nerve to ask for another go at that first wand.

Father didn't seem as concerned until a succession of wands with phoenix feather cores also produced an eerie absence of magic, whatever the length and wood and shape. By the time they had entered the third dozen of wands for Draco to try, with Ollivander coaching him to calm down, concentrate, not to panic, Father looked so apoplectic Draco feared an eruption of uncontrolled magic from Father more than himself.

"Tell me," Father said tightly, after a wand of holly and phoenix feather was as impotent in Draco's hand as the rest, "That my son, my only son and heir, is not a Squib." He cast a sharp glance to Mother, who darted to secure the perimeter against potential observers, for what Draco's parents seemed to be preparing to face as one of the greatest-ever shames to the name of Malfoy.

"I'm not a *Squib*!" Draco protested, hating the lack of authority in his high-pitched voice, and Mother returned with a small nod. He hadn't used to understand it so well, the small gestures and looks they would exchange over his head, but he could read this one easily enough. *No one is around to spread the word that our son is something that would have made him better off strangled in his cradle.* "I'm not! I've had bursts of accidental magic, like any other child, you know that," he told Mother, then looked at Father with his parents' grimness starting to affect him. "I'm *not*!"

Ollivander still held an outward facade of calm, though inwardly he had to be wondering whether he had bitten off more than he could chew. "Sometimes it can take many tries to find the right wand. Or sometimes, in rare cases, a young wizard is simply better suited to one of the rarer cores not made here-"

"Draco has used my wand before," Mother interrupted, a bit of impoliteness rare for her, but she seemed brimming with the need to convince herself. "I've taught him a few simple spells.

First-year charms. Different lights. Sparklers and butterflies- he never had too much difficulty."

"Hmm," Ollivander said, peering down with a critical eye that made Draco almost as uneasy as the threat of his parents' impending hysteria. "Yes, it is common in pureblood families for magical training to take place before a wand of the child's own has been chosen. Has your son practiced magic with any other wands? Such a lack of magic in any wand is unusual in any child born to wizards- even a Squib, let alone a child who has already demonstrated both accidental and intentional magic. Perhaps your son has already found a wand which does not like to share."

"That's impossible," Father snapped, lip curling like Ollivander was willfully wasting his time. "Draco has only practiced magic with my wife's wand, and only under supervision." And then, inwardly 18 or not, something in Draco's face seemed to give him away. "Draco?"

Draco took a deep breath, reached into his innermost pocket, and pulled out the talon wand. Mother let out a sharply indrawn breath and covered her mouth, while Father peered at it with a murderous sort of curiosity. "I have, Mr. Ollivander. Only a little. I found this wand at Malfoy Manor, and I've been practicing with it." He looked up, only to see Ollivander's previously unflappable face gone as frozen as his mother's.

"And it has worked for you?" Ollivander asked in a strained voice. "It has responded?"

"Yes," Draco said, and Ollivander whispered a spell under his breath, Caduceus revelare something, which seemed to replicate the conditions of testing a new wand. Immediately, there was a blast of something murky and syrupy that smelled like poison in the air, inkiness exploding outwards that could only be described as shadow, emitting high enough to smash into the ceiling and send wood hurtling over them.

"Protego," Draco called instinctively, a second before a large splinter could hit his mother's face, and then the fragments of the ceiling seemed to drift harmlessly down around the sphere of his shield, though it was hard to see through the shadows. Only once the shield around the four of them dropped did the bubble of darkness dissipate as well, leaving Draco's parents staring at him with looks he had never once seen them wear for him before.

On Draco's father, it was the ire he would have expected, though overlaid with a certain level of caution he should have never have had to wear for his own son.

On Mother, he had only seen that look in her eyes when the Dark Lord spoke her name.

Ollivander glanced instinctively towards Father, as did Mother, with both of them puzzled when they saw his hands empty and realized he hadn't been the one to cast the charm. "That was quick thinking, Draco," Ollivander said, understanding first, while Father and Mother looked between Ollivander and each other. "A very impressive reaction for your age. It seems we can safely conclude Mr. Malfoy is not a Squib whatsoever. He has just had his magic bonded to a wand already. My services will perhaps not be required after all."

"Are you the one who sold that wand before?" Father demanded. Mother nodded while staring at her feet, before Ollivander replied.

"I did indeed, alongside your lovely wife's. Dragonheart like her sister's. Twelve and three quarter inches, dark walnut, curved." Ollivander's voice could not hide his reluctance to speak the words. "I sold this wand many years ago to Bellatrix Lestrange."

Whatever Draco could have said died in his throat. He wanted to drop the wand, to hurl it as far away as he could. He might have set it on fire if he had been any good at wandless spells.

He only had been once. Shattering the glass that held him back from this wand that been-

"How," Father said, a trembling finger raised pointing in the air, not so much at Ollivander as at reality itself for so bafflingly defying him, "*How* could the wand that belonged to my wife's sister respond to my 11-year-old son?"

"Dragonheart cores do not tend to be loyal," Ollivander said solemnly, "Particularly if won in duels, they bond quickly and strongly to a new owner, forgetting the last. And in a long absence..." None of them had to speak to remember that Aunt Bella had been in Azkaban for almost all of Draco's life. "The dragon heartstring core- even a wand of such power- even a wand that has, perhaps, known dark magic, forgive me-"

"Do not mince your words," Father said with a snarl. "Tell me what this means. Now."

Ollivander frowned and heaved a sigh, while Mother just got paler and paler, staring at her feet like a ghost was crawling up from beneath the floorboards. "Such a wand may be claimed by a wizard of greater power than its last owner. Or with a stronger aptitude for dark magic."

That got Ollivander pulled into his office by Father in a way even a Squib label had not, with Mother following but Draco left outside in the cold. Ollivander only stopped to repair the hole in the roof, vanish the debris, and cast Draco a look perhaps not as pitying as one might have expected, before following Draco's parents behind a door that closed in Draco's face.

Wandering through the shelves with the ugly wand still in hand, Draco secreted himself in a corner, near the end of one of the cavernous shelves of wand boxes, as far out of sight as he could. It rendered it no easier to breathe, with the twisted wand on his lap no less brutal a poison to his very welling eyesight, one he could not bring himself to look away from.

He cried for quite some time, despite his resolution not to cry again after he left Azkaban. He had only mentally allotted himself the right to cry at Severus's funeral. And that had only been *maybe*. Maybe not, if Potter was there.

Nor did retreating into the shelves keep him from discovery. His parents still hadn't emerged from their undoubtedly grim conference with Ollivander, when he heard a voice over him, asking after his welfare.

"Are you alright?" repeated the owner of that voice, and without looking up, even with the intervening years in which that voice had broken and become a man's since Draco last heard it this childish and clear, Draco would never not know the voice of Harry Potter.

"Are you sick? Do you need help?" Potter prodded, footsteps nearing until Draco could feel him looming over the stool where he sat, radiating concern for the pathetic stranger he had not yet learned to hate.

Strangers. Draco had wanted to stay that way until he could ask Severus what to do, had rearranged their schedule to that end, and yet all his interference had done was ensure he met Harry Potter on the same fateful day. Except today he was pathetic. And you never got another chance to make a first impression.

At least he knew who he was talking to this time.

"Can I help?" Potter asked intently, and actually reached out and touched Draco's shoulder with disarming gentleness. He had the voice of a child, and as Draco looked up, the face and height of a child as well, disconcerting when some part of him had been envisioning Potter as he looked the last day of Draco's trial, holding out Draco's wand before turning on his heel without a word.

He was trying to speak to Draco now.

"I'm Harry," Potter said, with an eager earnestness to his voice that made it feel surreal if not impossible for Draco to be the one this angelic child-Potter was talking to. "Please tell me what's wrong. I came here with an adult, but he went to buy something when Mr. Ollivander was busy. Should I try to find him?"

"No," Draco said, resolution not to speak a word to Potter undone in an instant at the fear of being seen in this state by what had to be Hagrid. "No. Don't. I- uh, I-" The words were difficult to get out. He had not thought it would follow him, these fits of crying and panic that had begun in sixth year and never really stopped since. But if the dark magic he learned in that time had also followed, it was only fair for this to have followed as well.

Sixth year.

He should just be grateful the silvery lines of scars Potter had left on his body that year hadn't followed here too.

"What's going on?" Potter asked, eyes going to the wand in Draco's lap, and there was a spark to that brilliant green- the eyes were exactly the same- with intelligence that Draco didn't remember seeing so keenly the first time. "Are you here to get a wand too? Is that your new one?" He lowered his voice. "Is something wrong with it? I don't mean to pry. But the man who brought me, Hagrid, he knows all about Diagon Alley and Hogwarts- he's the groundskeeper- maybe he could help?"

The first time, he'd just seen Potter as a nobody. Another faceless classmate to impress. There would be no impressing Potter now. And Merlin, the thought of *Hagrid*, without even a proper wand of his own, summoned to comment on the wand of *Bellatrix Lestrange*?

Draco had to say something. It was a shock to see Potter like this, but more of a shock to be treated with nothing but friendly concern. Fresh. Untainted.

But Draco wasn't talking. This time around, Potter was going to think he was an imbecile.

"Yes- it's- this wand," Draco said, not knowing what to say except the truth, to avoid the horror of a helpful Hagrid. "But I don't need help. I- I-" he struggled to breathe, hugging his arms around his small body, aware he must look very much in need of help. "It's just- it's not the wand I wanted. The wand I should have. But there's no fixing it. The wand chooses the wizard."

"Oh," Potter said, and knelt down to meet Draco at eye level with mortifying kindness. "I'm sorry you don't like your wand. Are you going to Hogwarts?" Draco nodded tightly, trying to gather himself. Potter's eyes looked even huger than he remembered in a smaller rounder face, like a little owl behind glasses with a broken frame. "Are you a first-year too?" Draco nodded, because apparently something in the universe had decided he was. "It's, er, it's nice to meet you."

And then Potter stuck out what Draco had waited for on the train to Hogwarts that had never come. Harry Potter's outstretched hand, offered for him to shake.

"I, uh, I'm Harry," Potter said with an excited kind of embarrassment, like meeting Draco was actually something special, and shook Draco's hand hard. "I, oh, I guess I already said that. I've never met another wizard before."

Draco blinked. He knew Potter had been raised like a wild animal by savage Muggles, but they were in Diagon Alley. "I thought- you said you came with Hagrid," Draco said, wondering if his mind was working properly. At least he could breathe, like Potter's nervousness had finally calmed him. "Does he not count as a wizard?" Draco wouldn't consider him to, but he doubted Potter would be of that opinion, so the boy was just blathering as far as Draco could tell.

"Oh!" Potter blushed a shade brighter than any Draco would have thought he could evoke from Potter, in anything other than anger. "I mean, yeah, of course, no, I meant another wizard my age. Sorry. What's your name?"

"Draco," Draco said obligingly, choosing to leave off the Malfoy, and found himself losing patience with Potter's ridiculous kneeling, perched like an officious house elf waiting for orders. "You might as well sit down."

Potter flashed a bright smile once Draco pulled another stool over, and the panic in Draco's chest seemed to vanish as if it had never been.

"Draco," Potter repeated, as if to be sure he was pronouncing it right. Draco supposed Muggles didn't have such noble ancient names.

"Like a dragon," Draco explained, that smile drawing out an unexpected desire to please, when he shouldn't have been talking more than necessary and risking changing the past. But Severus wasn't there to tell him how not to ruin the life of the boy beaming at him. "Like the constellation. It's the name of a dragon in the sky. And a fair number of real dragons, of course."

The wonder that lit up the liquid pools of Potter's eyes was so genuine it made Draco uncomfortable. "So dragons really are real? Like witches and wizards and goblins- dragons are real too? Hagrid said there were some guarding the high-security vaults at Gringotts, but I wasn't sure if he was joking... though I did see fire in the air, and we're supposed to buy dragon-hide..."

"You'd heard of them before? Do Muggles have legends of dragons?" Draco asked, frowning in surprise. "I suppose they would have to, wouldn't they? As magical creatures go, it would seem harder to miss the airborne and inflammatory sort."

Potter laughed. He actually laughed, and Draco's gut clenched more painfully than it had when Ollivander told him whose wand had chosen him.

"That is so cool," Potter breathed, and stared at Draco as if he was the one who had personally invented dragons.

"You might have to wait a while for your wand or come back tomorrow," Draco said, knowing he should give Potter a reason to go and find his pet giant rather than linger around here, doing incomprehensible things like laughing at Draco's jokes and smiling at him with eyes that hadn't changed at all. "My parents aren't happy about the wand that chose me. They could be in there with Ollivander all night."

"Oh," Potter said, with what looked like a tinge of jealousy adding to the green of those eyes. It figured. Poor, poor parentless Potter. "Is it really a bad wand? Because it's crooked? Can I see it?"

Draco felt no option but to nod and let the Boy Who Lived do as he liked, feeling at the wand of Bellatrix Lestrange, the witch who'd fanatically served the wizard who was the reason Potter didn't have parents like Draco did, to take him to buy his school supplies.

Potter picked it up and turned it in his hand. "Does it not work?"

Unsurprisingly, Hagrid had seemed to have done a miserable job explaining the simplest things to Potter. He probably wasn't much better off than he would have been with the Muggles. "No, it's just that it's *my* wand. See?" Draco lifted it and pointed it at the tape holding on one side of Potter's glasses. "Those are driving me insane. They're hurting my eyes. Reparo."

Potter gasped and pulled off the glasses to stare at them rejoined, the plaster come off. They were still astoundingly cheap-looking, of course. Draco was a wizard, but there were some things so ugly they fell beyond magic. "Don't worry, the Trace is basically never enforced if you've got wizard parents," Draco comforted Potter, only to find his awe coming from a more basic root.

"How did you do that? Thank you, Draco," breathed Potter.

Draco almost told him how easy it was. It would have been even for his real 11-year-old self. But he found the words to show off or mock Potter's naiveté dying on his tongue. What was

the point of trying to impress or intimidate Potter? The real Potter wanted nothing to do with Draco. He shouldn't be making an impression at all. "It's a charm. A repair charm."

"Wow," Potter said, staring at him with enough renewed wonder that Draco stopped feeling the drying tears on his face until he heard his father bark his name.

He wiped quickly at his face with his sleeve then, pocketing the offending wand. "I'm coming, Father!" Draco called, and turned to Harry as he stood. "There. Looks like you'll be able to get your wand today after all."

"Wait," Potter said, and seemed to reach out to snag Draco's sleeve to keep him there before thinking better of it. Just the sight was enough to freeze Draco where he stood, any show of Potter actually wanting to touch him. He hadn't since they'd been on a broom together, fleeing the flames that Crabbe was swallowed by. "Wait, Draco, how does this work? How can I make sure I don't get a wand that isn't good either?"

He'd left Potter with a false impression of the process and its difficulty. No wonder that restless anxiety was on his face again. "You'll get a great wand. Of course you will. A powerful one."

"What do you mean? How do you know?" Potter's face pleaded childishly for reassurance.

But Draco just said as much of the truth as he could. "Because you're Harry Potter," he said, and turned on his heel and went to join his parents.

The Elves of Malfoy Manor

Draco was not going to let Father take his wand away from him.

He let Father take him right back to the Manor, leaving his other supplies for another day, if there was to be another day. He let Father herd him into a part of the dungeons where he had only ever dragged Draco before when he was truly angry, like when he was kicked off the Hogwarts board, or when the Mudblood got higher marks than Draco for the first time. It was not unfamiliar, the way Father dragged him down by the collar, not so different from how Draco had seen other Death Eaters drag prisoners into these cells last year. It was not unfamiliar to have Mother shooed away and the doors spelled shut behind them, or that demand to remove his robes and shirt right off that meant invariably Draco was about to be hurt. On the walk there, though, unlike any time before, Draco had shifted his wand from his robe to one of his side trouser pockets.

Father didn't usually begin so quickly. Draco had barely taken his seat in that old despised pinewood chair before Father rounded on him, with a demonic fierceness in his eyes that had used to scare Draco more. Draco had his wand at his side, though he didn't intend to pull it unless he thought he was about to ruin the future or die. It wasn't like he thought he could take Father in a duel, even with all the experience he had that Father didn't know about, and even with a wand that had done more dark things that Father could ever dream. Trying to duel Father would give so much away he might as well shout to the rooftops he wasn't the real Draco Malfoy anymore.

"How did you find that wand?" Father hissed, getting right in his face with that unsettling snarl. It made Draco remember Father's face the first time they ever visited him in Azkaban, stubble-covered and sunken like his own living ghost, enough bone showing through it gave him a dead-eyed permanent snarl. "How?" Father repeated, and in an instant was brandishing his wand at Draco's chest. The thump of the cane falling to the ground followed.

Draco's heart went insane like he hadn't expected, worse than it would have at 11. *Calm down,* he told himself. *He's not going to Crucio you, he never did back then, he'll probably just use stinging hexes on your back. Compared to Crucio, that's nothing. And he won't make you cast it on anyone. He definitely won't do the things with you cornered alone in a dungeon that Greyback would.*

No. There was nothing to be afraid of. Other than how little idea he had how to answer.

His first instinct was the truth, and damn what happened to Dobby after. He didn't know if it had been against the rules or just the spirit of them, for Dobby to help Draco the way he had. But no configuration of those would save Dobby from his father's wrath, a more convenient scapegoat than the only heir. At 11, Draco might have enjoyed watching the elf take the punishment destined for Draco, before he had seen enough punishments to lose his taste for them. He would have turned Dobby over to Father anyway, if Dobby had been just any elf. But he was Potter's. He was meant to save Potter in the future from this Manor, from Aunt Bella with this terrible wand in her hand. Dobby was meant to be a war hero, bizarrely

enough, and if Father hurt him too badly or killed him, that might be enough to make Potter and his pet Weasel and Mudblood perish that night. Because Salazar knew Draco would never have the strength, not if he travelled back and forth a thousand years, to be the one to save them.

"Draco," Father snarled, "I asked you a question," and Draco looked up with the shields falling into place in his mind that had in time learned to withstand even Aunt Bella.

"I found it," Draco said, "In an old room, somewhere in the back halls of the manor. I just happened to." His story sounded implausible, though it was much like how he had happened upon the mirror that had got him into this.

"Why did you take it and do magic with it?" Father asked with barely constrained ferocity, beginning to pace around the small space before whirling on Draco again. "Why? Why would you disobey us when you knew you were only to practice magic with myself or your mother?"

Draco tested his lying skills. "I just wanted to be ready as soon as I could for Hogwarts, Father," he said in a trembling voice, "Because- because you always say my magic is so weak for a Malfoy, so I just wanted to start-"

The way Father's face distorted with contempt showed he bought it, but his next question was all too well-aimed. "And so you wanted a wand, and like the spineless fool you are, you wandered around asking for someone to get you one. Did you get one of the house elves to show you? Who else could have?"

"No, I told you, I found it. It was in a glass case with a sword and some coins and things. I didn't know it was anyone special's wand. I thought it was really old, Father." He let the childish whining note creep into his voice, a wayward young version of the son Father knew and not a stranger in this useless little body. "I thought we keep all the dark objects in the cellars. I didn't think it would be there if it was-"

"Silence," Father snapped, and brandished his wand close to Draco's eyes. Draco didn't have to pretend to flinch away. "It is impossible to find that room on your own. There are charms to discourage visitors from just wandering in. Only myself and our elves would have access. And that glass was charmed. It was elf magic to remove it, wasn't it?"

Draco briefly considered throwing one of the other house elves to the wolves instead of Dobby, but if that creature was fool enough to sacrifice himself for Potter like the world's sole house elf representative of Gryffindor, he could be the kind to find that out and hurl himself on the sword anyway, rather than let one of his compatriots take the blame. "I shattered the glass, Father." That part was true. "With wandless magic," he added, at Father's contemptuous snort.

"You? Wandless magic?" Father marveled, beginning his pacing again. "You have never been able to so much as summon a spark from your hands. And you expect me to believe you singlehandedly shattered a glass case enchanted to hold the darkest artifacts in Malfoy Manor?" Draco nodded weakly, and Father lowered his wand, which boded worse rather than

better to come, as it would have in any other man. "Show me then. Let's see this incredible wandless magic my master wizard of a son can now produce."

Draco tried. He really did. "Lumos," he said, trying to get light or at least the sparks Father had spoken of to come from his fingers, but they felt as dead as the wands had in Ollivander's. "Incendio," he tried, visualizing flames in the air like he had used to burn up so many notes, but without a wand in hand, there was nothing.

Father barked out a chilling laugh that made it harder to remember the man he had been in Azkaban. "Of course. Not a drop of it. That does not surprise me. What does, Draco, is why in Salazar's name you would protect a house elf." He circled like a hawk homing closer to its prey. "Do you think it will be worse for you, to admit that you used one of our elves- of all the lowest tricks and creatures you could have used, to defy my orders and profane a property I was personally charged with safekeeping-" Father seemed to have lost track of his sentence. "Do you think it will be worse than continuing to lie so brazenly to my face?"

Draco looked directly at him. He had to, for there to be any chance of Father believing the lie. When he did, he saw on that face that there was no chance regardless. But at least he had looked him in the eye. "I'm not lying, Father."

Draco knew what Father was going to do even before he ordered Draco to turn and face backwards in the chair. When Draco didn't immediately obey, a wave of Father's wand sent the chair falling out from beneath Draco and Draco trying to pick himself off the ground. At least he had his face off the floor and was almost to his knees before the first wordless stinging hex hit him. Maybe Father was using his wand, or maybe he wasn't. He sometimes hadn't, and might not this time, to make a point about how much more powerful he was than his son. The snapping force in the hex almost sent Draco's face into the stone again. The strength in these hexes, he remembered, often seemed to be proportional to how angry he had made his father.

It felt like he had made him very angry.

It was only two more stings of that invisible whip, though, before Father's snarl sounded again. "Count, insolent child. You are to count, or I will repeat the blows. You will have ten, and now we begin again."

Draco gritted his teeth, finding the stone felt very cold underneath his knees. He had thought this would be nothing compared to the Cruciatus curse. But he had not thought whether his 11-year-old body would inherently be less able to tolerate pain than his older one.

And he had forgotten the special sting the pain carried from the knowledge it came directly from his father's disgust in him.

"Yes, Father," Draco said by rote, and Lucius hexed him again. "One," he said obediently, and so on. His voice only broke on the count of six, which was actually nine if his math wasn't already failing him. By the time Father reached ten, he was breathing hard and gasping out the numbers. Father had usually started with five, and typically with far less strength behind the blows. Sometimes by the time Father reached ten, Draco had already been at the point of

sobbing, or begging Father to stop, or even writhing and collapsing or pissing himself. Now, he felt only a prick of what could be tears at the back of his eyes, or could be anger.

"Well, then, Draco," Father said, with only some of his irritation sounding to have been worked out of him. "You have taken your punishment for disobedience and falsehood. Do not continue in such folly. Give me the name of the house elf who helped you steal your aunt's wand."

Dobby's name was on the tip of his tongue. He didn't know why it didn't come out. He'd always been a coward. He would have thought it could have been his mother's life, his own life on the line, and only a little pain would make him crumble to another's will as so many other things had.

An image flickered through his head, dreamy, ethereal, like a passing phrase of music, a leitmotif blowing through the air before disappearing: the look on Potter's face when he assured him dragons were real.

"I got it," Draco gasped out, with that hideous illusion beginning to form that he was tasting blood in his mouth, despite the blows coming nowhere near it, and his back probably not splitting yet. "I got it by myself. No help."

That earned Draco five more stings, dutifully counted by a voice that was starting finally to choke with threatened tears, before Father summoned the house elves. All of them.

It was a sight Draco could never have imagined, his father willingly presenting his only son in such a tableau to their wizard's dozen of elves, all thirteen magically compelled to fill this small stone dungeon room and stare at Master Draco on his knees. Except maybe that meant to be a punishment to Draco's pride as well as body. Bad enough to be treated like this, but to let the elves see it was a further level of humiliation. Or Father just might think it more likely Draco hand over the culprit, if the little devil was right before him to sacrifice.

Draco hated them, a row of 26 marble eyes in which Dobby's were only a slightly jarring break. He had never liked the homely creatures, and he liked them even less for their kind having fought to defend Hogwarts in the final battle against the Dark Lord, when Draco himself had not had the courage. Dobby was more of a hero than him. He was more use to Potter. And if Draco had to suffer a little more pain than he already had, it was nothing more than a raindrop in a hurricane. Let them stare, let them watch their future lord be treated like them. Dementors had been less pleasant attendants.

"Which one," Father said, stepping away from Draco to prowl along the line of elves and gesture at them carelessly with his wand drawn. "A name, Draco, and this is all over. Who is the elf who violated the sanctity of this manor, and let my underage son be magically bound to a wand I did not choose for him? Who? If you do not recall which of them, Draco, you need merely turn and point, and I can help you place a name to a face."

Father's sarcasm had Draco shifting blearily on his knees to face them full-on, the gleam of their eyes in the dim dungeon like a lengthy set of stars set frostily above him in judgment. All their faces looked terrified, but that was harder to make out than the eyes. He tried not to look at Dobby longer than the others, and hoped Father wouldn't either. Dobby's face was

different than the other elves there: not more fearful, precisely, it was hard to tell on an elf, but something closer to guilt, or perhaps anger. "None of them, Father. I found the room."

Father growled in frustration and banged his walking stick on the ground. "Who?" he demanded of the elves, and none of them said a word, though Draco saw two of them jump back. More did when Father re-embedded his wand in the walking stick, the silver snake head sliding ominously back into place, and raised it over Draco's back.

Huh. In Draco's memory, it usually took a little longer to progress from hexes to the cane itself, but it had been a pretty long time.

"Fuck!" Draco spat at the eruption of jaw-clenching pain that struck at his lower back and thudded through the rest of his body in echo, an impact so wracking it sent nausea clenching at his insides, worse than he remembered, worse than he could have imagined. Except the second was worse yet. He lowered his face, not wanting to see the temptation of those creature's faces, the temptation to lift a single finger in Dobby's direction and end this screaming agony in his back-

At the price of Potter's death. Perhaps, if it amused the Dark Lord, at Draco's hands.

He closed his eyes and tried to brace himself for the next strike, only for it to hit hard enough to send him face-first into the stone, where he found himself vomiting, retching out nothing much but bile- he hadn't eaten since the morning- on stones so much like he remembered watching the brandy he had poured out for Vince pooling golden over, flowing smooth and hypnotizing and a world away from these helpless expulsions corroding each time through all his lungs, burning at his chest and throat. The acid was as strong as if the very liquids in his body had been cursed and turned on him. He didn't know why it hurt so much. He sobbed and vomited and Father raised his walking stick over him again, and maybe if he was a different person, he would have reached for his wand. Maybe he should have. But he didn't. He just cowered on the ground and prayed for it to be over.

"It was Dobby!" a high clear voice proclaimed, with the sound of small feet pattering forward before the cane could fall- Dobby himself, who looked there for a moment, silhouetted in the shadows over Draco like some small spindly gargoyle of an angel. "Dobby told Master Draco about the wand. Dobby took Master Draco to the room. Dobby broke the glass and got Master Draco the wand. It is Dobby's fault, Master Lucius, do not hurt Master Draco anymore- it is Dobby's fault-"

"Dobby, wait," Draco tried to say, heart sinking even as the retching slowed, threatening to sink back down and choke all of his chest, because in an instant, he'd lost, Potter had lost, Father was about to take that stick and get out the wand and a green light would-

"Of course it was Dobby," Father said contemptuously, "Disobedient worm," and put his walking stick down.

The other elves were silent. Draco could feel the terror as sharp from them as any room full of people, with Voldemort angry within it. Father's power over them was just as absolute. But Father had lowered his hand. Draco grabbed his discarded shirt and tried to wipe his eyes,

then his mouth, willing himself not to do anything to make it more likely for Father to kill Dobby.

Draco had just *had* to have a wand, which he would have gotten in a week anyway. The right wand, if he could have waited. To get into the cellars, which hadn't done him any good at getting home anyway. He'd wanted to get down here? Well, he and Dobby were in the cellars now, in the absolute pits, the depths of the lowest dark. The Severus in his mind smirked and asked him dryly whether a wizard had ever been quite so ill-served by getting what he wished for.

"Dobby will not let Master Draco suffer any more to protect Dobby," Dobby proclaimed in a bolder voice, as noble-sounding in that squeaky little voice as Potter himself, and Merlin, Draco had been right to call Dobby a Gryffindor.

"Oh, he will not," Father growled, and took Draco's stained shirt and flung it at Dobby, who caught it with widening eyes. "You will get him into no further disgrace, because I will not have a house elf on these historic premises who will disrespect them and endanger my son. Let this be a lesson to all of you. Follow my laws or you too will be cast out into the cold. Dismissed!"

Father turned on his heel, and perhaps he would have gone then, to the popping sound of elves disapparating, in the wake of witnessing one of their own receiving the worst punishment a master could give save death- perhaps, in most of their eyes, worse than death. But not Dobby's, and Draco was laughing. He couldn't help himself, laughing and laughing where he lay shaking on the floor. Because he knew Father could make awful decisions, and been weak or even cowardly, but he had never thought Father could be this *stupid*.

If Father had truly wished to punish Dobby, and not just scare the others- and it had seemed real anger behind that punishment- he could hardly have picked a worse method to accomplish it.

Perhaps Potter would survive his visit to Malfoy Manor yet. Whether Draco himself would survive his time here now felt a slightly less promising prospect, but all seemed likely to be well, if he could only keep from giving the game away by laughing.

But laugh he did, and couldn't stop.

"Never lie to me again," Father snarled, before leaving Draco to his laughter.

"Master Draco," Dobby wailed, reaching down to help pull him up with flailing hands. "Master Draco is hurt. But Dobby must leave. Dobby should be leaving already, but Dobby cannot leave Master Draco like this. Dobby will get Mistress Narcissa-"

"No," Draco laughed, which turned to one cough and then another. "No. Not my mother. It's fine. It's fine, don't whine like that, aren't you happy? You're free. That's lucky, isn't it? Lucky Father doesn't pay any attention to his house elves." Then again, Draco until very recently hadn't had reason to either. "He's so, so stupid, Dobby. Be happy you're free."

Dobby stared at Draco with earnest marble eyes gone almost misty, helping to prop him up with a meticulous gentleness. "Master Draco is so kind to Dobby. Master Draco is good. Master Draco- Draco- Draco Malfoy is like Harry Potter."

Draco blinked, jarred by the name enough to fall grasping against the wall in the threshold. "Potter? No. I just..." He couldn't exactly tell Dobby he had tried to protect him for Potter's sake. "You know Harry Potter?"

"No," Dobby said excitedly, trying to help him along while holding onto Draco's sullied shirt like it was some great treasure. "But Dobby has heard many tales of him, and how he defeated the Dark Lord, and Dobby is thinking great things of this Harry Potter."

Good Lord. It was nauseating enough, Potter's endless Inferi army of adoring fans. Now he had house elf fans too?

"I'm not," Draco told him, grabbing at his back as if holding where it hurt would make it hurt less. He might try to do some spell on it if he could think of one, or reach quite at the pocket. "I'm just- I can't help you any more, Dobby. You should go to Hogwarts. They will give you- will probably give you a job. Dumbledore. He- he might pay you, to work there. Hogwarts, it's... it's a much better place than here."

"Draco Malfoy is going to Hogwarts soon!" Dobby exclaimed excitedly. "If Dobby works at Hogwarts, Dobby can help Draco Malfoy, and make sure Draco Malfoy does not get hurt like this again. Dobby will protect Draco Malfoy."

"No, Dobby. I- Harry, Harry Potter, he'll be- he'll be there too, soon. You should- you should go if you can, to look after- watch over him." Draco grabbed the wall again, world spinning, wondering with some detached Severus-like disgust if he was the one acting like a Gryffindor now.

It was in his own best interest, though, however selfless any action might seem in the short term. He had a future he had to save, to keep things from being even worse for him and his mother. A future that needed Potter to kill the Dark Lord for them. And in that future, a lot of Gryffindor things had to happen.

"Dobby will watch over you both," Dobby proclaimed with astounding confidence, and it was only after Dobby had conducted Draco all the way past the dragon sparking at his door that he said goodbye and apparated out of the manor as a free elf for the first time.

The Sorting Hat

At first, Father had proved singularly inept at punishments. Being confined to Malfoy Manor, forbidden from Quidditch or seeing his pureblood friends- those were all just excuses not to do things he didn't want to anyway, for fear of screwing up the past along with a sheer lack of energy. But say this for Father- when he improved, he did so spectacularly.

Draco was late to the Hogwarts Express. He arrived at Platform 9 and 3/4 unattended, though Mother had defied Father enough to surreptitiously push two vials of numbing potion into his pocket before letting him go. He took one, downing it unceremoniously from the small silvery vial the second he was through the barrier, able to reflect once the pain grew less bracing that if he really had been a first-year new to all this Muggle chaos, it would have been impossible to make it on time.

But he made it, with no one around to see him toss the slender vial away before racing towards the train. His heavy trunks dragged behind him. He'd had Vince and Greg to carry them last time. He cast the Featherlight charm twice quickly on pure instinct, getting them and his body on the train almost just as it began to move. He didn't get his trunk taken to be magically transported like always before, but that was alright. Just once, he could carry luggage like a house elf, if Dobby who wanted to be free could have done this sort of work for years without snapping. He stood there in the corridor listening to the whistle and steam engine, mixed with the sound of owls and children and so much cheery distant hopefulness he thought he might be sick, even with Mother's potion to help. Then he dragged himself down the corridor, hoping to find the rare unicorn that was a compartment completely empty.

Draco had hardly gotten far, though, in an agonized trudge where nostalgia proved completely absent, before peering at the window of one compartment revealed Vince and Greg with a copious pile of chocolate frogs between them.

Draco fell. He caught himself backwards before his knees completely gave out, side thudding unpleasantly against one of his sliding trunks, but he did fall. He could tell himself it was from trying to stand with the train moving, but he knew it was the sight of Vince, round-faced and chocolate-smeared and 11 and alive. Panic spiked through him as sharp as it had with the name Bellatrix Lestrange on Ollivander's lips, sharper than the numbed burn of his back as it hit the wall, every bit of skin struck by that walking stick come alight- but that was nothing to the conflagration in his head that had him not breathing from the smoke, because fire was nothing, but when he looked through the glass at that oblivious 11-year-old Vince he saw Fiendfyre-

Fiendfyre was what he planned to abandon Vince in yet again, if he followed his oh-so-noble intentions to run back to the present and keep everything the same. Fiendfyre was what pursued him down the corridor as he fled from the sight of the boy he had used to order around as his unpaid lackey eating chocolate frogs. He found he had left his trunks and could barely care, growling "Accio trunk" twice and feeling his half-uncontrolled wand send them hurtling towards him and slap against his shins, but that was nothing to the Fiendfyre. The very pain meant it felt like his legs were aching and not burning.

They ached worse after he sprinted to the very back of the train, unused to such exertion after a month locked down. His only times on a broom or moving around much at all had been the handful of occasions his mother let him out secretly at night, to go flying in the calming night air. She hadn't apologized for letting Father hurt him. She never did, especially not once Draco had made it clear in no uncertain terms that he blamed her as much as Father for her inaction, half as an excuse to keep distance from someone who might realize who he really was, and half because he meant it. But she had done what she could in her quiet way to make his penitential period easier, and it had gone so well until the snake in the garden. Even the snake bleeding out in pieces had been luckier than Draco, because Sectumsempra wasn't Fiendfyre-

He dragged his trunks into the last compartment and slammed the door, lashing out with his wand to force it closed after his first attempt made it bang open again. He dropped to one of the seats breathing like he had just been fighting for his life, because it felt like he had, as if slamming the glass had meant keeping out a blast of Fiendfyre only millimeters away from catching and consuming him. Then he looked around wildly, because the prospect of another person's eyes right now almost felt as deadly an idea as the curse, but he was alone.

He had time then to realize his foolishness objectively, certainly not having been just chased down the corridor of the Hogwarts Express by real Fiendfyre. He withdrew one of his massive notebooks from the top of his case, and flipped to where he had written of going to the Room of Requirement and Potter and his friends saving them, if not all of them. It was easier to reread because he had rendered it in less detail than most of the memories, a notebook per year just about filled already, with a month of nothing to do but memorize lists of names of spells his father gave him, names he had already mostly known.

These notebooks were the one real achievement of that month, along with the potion he made for their ink, invisible to all but the writer without a complicated sequence of spells and another potion with rare ingredients to force it visible, with a strong Featherlight charm to make all these heavy notebooks easy to lug around. It wasn't much, though it had been a terrifying task sneaking around trying to procure the ingredients for a surprisingly dark potion, from various Manor stores without being caught again. Oh, and he had also concluded that the proportion of the Manor library's store of books, with anything useful about time travel or hallucination-inducing mirrors, was exactly zero.

Maybe he would have been better served brewing some Calming Draughts.

He intended to go back to his own time, and believed implicitly in Severus's ability to make him, with their reunion fast approaching. But if he somehow *were* to end up trapped here any great length of time, his memories would fade naturally, without enchantment needed to effect the process. It was prudent to produce an accurate record of the future, when he still could with freshness- not as a means to change anything, but as a record of what was supposed to happen in an unchanged timeline, to avoid discrepancies.

There were no insights gleaned, though, from staring at the account of Vince's death that hadn't even filled up an entire page. Staring at the reminder of what he would have to let happen again- or live out again, if he could not return and the past had to be relived the same by Draco as unwilling actor- staring alone at a page blank to anyone who happened by,

without turning it as the minutes passed- when his 11-year-old self the first time had happily been making Vince pick out the strawberry Every-Flavor beans for him, and regaling them with tales of his future Quidditch glory as Slytherin Seeker in second year, before Blaise had passed by with the rumor that yes, somewhere on this train, there resided Harry Potter as their new classmate.

Without meaning to, Draco fell into an intermittent sleep, only half-asleep with partial dreams, a part of his mind aware they weren't real but lacking the energy to wake and banish them. He saw Potter standing over him, wand in hand, in Myrtle's bathroom as he bled, and then himself casting the same spell, over-panicked instinct making him let out without thinking the one curse he knew, other than the killing curse, that would instantly without a doubt make the snake unable to bite his mother. Garden snakes in the Manor weren't uncommon, often hunted by their albino peacocks, but this one had been unusually large, with a different coloring than the usual green-brown. His mind had instantly apprehended it as poisonous- except he knew nothing about snakes, and his mother told him after it was a species she knew wasn't poisonous, or magical either. He'd thought it poisonous because its markings reminded him of Nagini, who he had seen consume too many bodies not to expect this snake to swallow up his mother too given half a chance. Now his dreams showed him Potter panicking over Draco's own body bleeding out in the water, turning to Father bending over the corpse of the snake as it seeped dark blood into their flowerbeds, dead moments after the hemorrhaging came on with no song to save him, but that was alright, his mother was safe from him...

The jolt of the train coming to a stop alerted him to get moving. Much as part of him wished to stay and let what happened happen, he'd learned from annoying experience that students left on the Hogwarts Express didn't stay there for long. Or maybe they would if they weren't Harry Potter, but he had to find Severus regardless. Even if that meant seeing Vince again at the foot of the boats, as he deposited his bag and caught up to the other first-years by following Hagrid's yell and lantern up the path he remembered. He turned the corner and there it was in the distance, the great silhouette of the towers of Hogwarts thrown up above them, reflected in the water as clear as a mirror, unbreached and undefiled.

The past was better. So much better, except for the pain in his body, and all of the terrible things that would be once again be coming. Hogwarts *would* fall. The only question was whether it would be by these hands.

He stared at his round baby-looking hands, waiting as silently as if all the other first-years were invisible, only for Hagrid to start forcibly herding them into the boats. He made the mistake of stopping to look up, and there they were this time, the great dark wings of the Thestrals pulling the carriages above them, as visible as a dark rain emptying out the sky.

"Draco!" someone called. Draco froze so completely when he saw Harry Potter, he did nothing to stop Potter from pulling him into his boat before it set off. "Hello, Draco. I didn't realize you knew who I was last time I saw you, I'm sorry..."

"Only four to a boat at most," another gratingly familiar voice protested, higher but no less irritating, but they were already gliding over the still water before the Mudblood could make her case to anyone who would listen.

"Draco would have been left behind," Potter said earnestly, as if this would have been some great travesty and not objectively better for all parties involved. The redheaded member of their boat started forward at the name, while a quiet round-faced boy just cradled an even uglier toad to his chest. Weasley had reacted to Draco's first name, but even without it, the bright white of Draco's blond hair would have alerted him to Draco's bloodline, the same as the lurid orange of the Weasel's had to Draco the first time around.

He'd avoided Potter on the train. But a boat ride was far worse than a brief conversation. So far, everything he did in the past seemed to worsen it.

"Well, if we all fall in, we'll know why," Granger said primly, and regarded Draco with dubiousness.

"You two know each other already?" Weasley asked Potter with a note of jealousy. Oh, he didn't seem to like that. Someone else, he must be thinking, had weaseled their way in before him, in his mission to shamelessly ingratiate himself with the Chosen One. Luckily for him, Draco had no intention of making any attempts at friendship with Potter.

Not that they would have been any more successful this time around.

"Yes, we were getting our wands together," Potter said, an astonishingly charitable rendition of events. "This is Draco-" He faltered when he didn't know Draco's last name, because Draco hadn't actually told him. He should have, to have avoided Potter's excruciating fumbling before he had to fill in for him,

"Malfoy."

Both Weasley and the other boy in the boat reacted. "Malfoy?" Weasley echoed, and just like last time, a small chortle escaped from his ginger throat. Draco remembered the Weasel laughing last time, but he couldn't remember the comeback he must have given to such disrespect. All he could think was, *I poisoned and nearly killed you.*

His terse nod prompted the Mudblood to insert herself. "I'm Hermione Granger," she said with a pushy hand outstretched, never mind that she had been ready to shove him off their boat to obey the rules, "I'm from a non-magical family," which wasn't something she should have been so eager to proclaim. "But I've read all about the Great Lake in *Hogwarts: A History*."

"Draco Malfoy," he said thinly, remembering her as a third-year punching him in the nose. He turned towards the fourth boy, who he could speak to and avoid Potter's trio. He surely would have recognized anyone important. "Who are you supposed to be, then?"

"I'm Neville Longbottom?" the boy declared uncertainly, and it took Draco more time to shake this hand than Granger's. This had to be a trick. This diffident lump snuggling a lumpier toad couldn't possibly be Longbottom. Not even back then, though Draco did remember he had used to be quite pathetic, Severus's whipping boy. Longbottom hadn't always been as fit as he grew up to be. But this could not be Neville Longbottom of Dumbledore's Army, wielder of the Sword of Gryffindor, slayer of the Dark Lord's own Nagini-

Son of Frank and Alice Longbottom, tortured into madness by Bellatrix Lestrange, by the wand burning a hole in Draco's pocket.

The horror of that most brutal yet of ironies could have held for some time, had he not overheard Weasley telling Potter as the boat moved beneath a cliff, "I've heard of his family. They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. My dad doesn't believe it. He says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the dark side- what? Hey!"

Granger had elbowed him squarely in the ribs, seeing Draco could hear him over the water while the looming towers of Hogwarts edged closer. Weasley glared, only to see Draco watching, and paled rather significantly for such a ruddy face. "He heard you," Granger hissed in a stage whisper, as if anyone in their overcrowded boat had missed that, and Potter's green-eyed owl face went stricken.

"Don't, Ron, he's sitting right there," Potter said hurriedly, while Draco burned with the things he could have said a thousand times more cutting about any of their families. Outnumbered four to one by Gryffindors who had every right to look down on him, though they didn't know it yet. "Draco isn't like that, he's not," Potter insisted to Weasley, after meeting Draco a grand total of two times counting this one. And then he shot Draco a reassuring smile.

"It *is* true," Granger said loftily, "If his father is Lucius Malfoy. I read about him in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.* He was one of the most important followers of the Dark Lord. They were called Death Eaters." She recited merciless facts like nothing but trivia from a book. To her, they still were. "I don't know why."

Draco tried to speak, something, anything, maybe about how a real Death Eater would have seen a Mudblood like her running her mouth and showed her why they *were* called Death Eaters, but the stinging in his back was rising again. Defending himself was less important than figuring out a way to take Mother's second vial of numbing potion without anyone noticing- far less important, let alone spouting lies to defend Father. He stared at her dismally, wishing she would punch him in the face again and send him hurtling into the lake, sooner than ask, as she clearly wanted to, why Death Eaters were called that. The Giant Squid had to be a more pleasant conversationalist.

"Death Eaters?" Potter echoed, and looked at Draco anxiously.

Draco could not have been any gladder to find himself in range to scramble forward and fling himself out of the boat full of Gryffindors. His leg nearly turned over on the uneven wet pebbles of the shore, flung even before Hagrid got out his boat, and then there was his lantern lofted to follow in the direction of anywhere but here. He slipped between other puny children to try and get out of anyone's sight who cared, but his pale hair gave him away. To think he had used to relish how much attention it drew.

"Draco!" It wasn't Potter, at least, but it was almost worse- Pansy Parkinson, with Vince and Greg making their way up the stone passageway beside her. Vince looked right at him, waving a large Bludger-ready hand through the cooling air, and Draco pretended he hadn't seen, bolting into another thicket of chattering voices only to hear his name called again.

This time was Potter, whose eyes seemed to light up as much as a cat's in the dark, or maybe it was just that Draco always saw the pure Avada Kedavra-green light of death there, shining its siren call. "Draco! Draco, I'm sorry about on the boat- Draco, did you hear me?"

He might have been better off going to his fellow Slytherins, who would have been unlikely to let Potter seize Draco by the shoulder to snag his attention as they reached the grass. Contact to Draco's bruised shoulder made him nearly fall on the step down to the wet green, and of course Potter was the one there to catch him, when he would rather have fallen into the mud in front of the entire first-year class than have Potter bloody rescuing him again.

"Draco, are you alright?" Potter asked, as he pulled Draco in the direction Hagrid instructed, up a set of stone steps he was sure he could navigate without Potter's aid, if he would just let go of his arm and stop torturing the exact place the mouth of the snake head had twice landed. Fitting that part punish him as if in revenge for its own kind, as well as another egregious instance of the Malfoy heir going behind his father's back to mess with dark magic. Or maybe it had been him refusing even to identify the spell, and insisting that he should be rewarded, because he had saved Mother from the garden snake. No one saved Draco from the silver snake. "I'm sorry."

Had Potter actually left his favorite Weasel to deliver this counter-productively painful shoulder-clutching apology? Draco cast a look back and there were the three remaining Gryffindors from their boat a step or two behind, Weasley looking none too happy at Potter going to him, though it was a Gryffindor thing to do. Raised by Muggles and not sure if it was true about Draco, all Potter knew was that Weasley must have hurt Draco's feelings.

"It's fine," Draco said, finally managing to get his shoulder away as they came to a stop before the castle door, and Hagrid rapped his fist three echoing times. "I'm alright."

"I'm sorry you had to hear Ron saying those things about your father," Potter said earnestly, green eyes shining at him without looking away, even when McGonagall opened the doors and took over herding them in.

"Why?" Draco said. "He was right."

He sped his step so by the time they were in the chamber where McGonagall began to explain the sorting, he was surrounded on all sides only by terrified Hufflepuffs. To think that Draco could pre-sort them all if he liked, once McGonagall stopped talking, sort them with near-perfect accuracy except for those students in their year he couldn't remember one way or another.

Draco should have put on a show of acting nervous about how he would be sorted like the others, though he knew he would be Slytherin, and screaming at the appearance of ghosts, though he knew they were coming. He only felt strange when they were led into the Great Hall, with hundreds of candles hovering in the air along with an enchanted night sky Granger seemed bent and determined to tell the whole year about. Maybe it was the realization that the lighting he'd been making himself in the cellars and his bedroom, since the night he tried to shatter the mirror, was a few hovering candles quite like the ones at Hogwarts. He even seemed to have subconsciously chosen a similar shape and color.

He told himself he had never had any love for this place, that there was no sentimentality in seeing its former glory with fixtures and windowpanes still untouched by the damage the wand in his pocket would do. That it made him feel no more than Weasley's sneer or the return in the eyes of 11-year-old Potter of the same pity- not even anything bad, just nothing. But he could not even pretend to himself when he cast his gaze towards the high table and saw the glint of hair and beard lighter than his own, the headmaster front and center, hands folded before them as he presided over this hall, the epicenter of this small kingdom whose walls could surely never fall.

The blackest shape near the edge of the table had to be Severus, and once they had been led all the way up to the Sorting Hat, it was. Draco was still too far away to catch Severus's eye, though he made the attempt up until the hat launched into its mind-bogglingly irritating song. He glanced back towards Severus as the hat sang, *Perhaps in Slytherin you'll make your real friends.* Severus was not what one would call a friend, to Draco nor anyone else. Only his godfather, and luckily enough also a human being with inherently vested interest in seeing the future not disintegrate thanks to a misplaced Malfoy. Severus's pillar of black, black robes, black greasy hair, dark and yet so incredibly young-looking, so incredibly alive, that was the only hope in all the ceremonial trappings here.

The students seemed to take this at once too seriously and not nearly seriously enough. Your House didn't just determine the color of your tie. It could well determine the color of your skin before their seven years were over: its original hue under victorious golden sunlight, or dead and rotting sea-green and grey underground.

McGonagall called Hannah Abbott to be sorted. He along with Severus and everyone else watched the hat as it shouted out, "HUFFLEPUFF!" He mouthed Hufflepuff to himself before the hat yelled, interested in this small proof of the past unfurling as he had remembered, and mouthed the next two sorted correctly before fearing someone would see his lips and somehow figure out what he was doing right. That jarring realization kept him from clapping Millie sent to Slytherin, though she gave the same wide-eyed manic giggle to them all that he remembered. He sorted along only in his head after that, while strengthening the walls in his head of his Occlumency on the chance Severus might prematurely want to take a look around, and wondered inanely if strong enough Occlumency could prevent the Sorting Hat from rummaging around in his head. Last time, though, it had barely even touched his head before calling out Slytherin. He'd been proud of that.

Granger sorted Gryffindor quickly, Longbottom less so, with a length of deliberation only to be matched in his memory by Potter's later. Probably couldn't choose between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff for either. Unless the presence of Voldemort hanging around in Potter's head confused the whole thing.

He could only hope the presence of a mysterious and possibly dark magic in his head would not muck it up the same. He stepped forward at the call of *Malfoy, Draco* without confidence, because the mirror had done something to him, not just sending him to the past but leaving some lingering trace of magic there. It was the only explanation he could fathom for how, as Ollivander said, his magic could ever be considered either more powerful or dark than Aunt Bella's. And if the wand of the Dark Lord's right-hand woman could be deceived by Draco's

status as an intruder from another time, there was no telling what it could make the Sorting Hat do, once it fell on his head like the descent of a guillotine.

At least he didn't think it was liable to up and yelp, "He's an imposter from the future!"

Or at least he hoped not.

His name had naturally aroused interest from the students in the hall, not the least the Slytherins. But once the hat was on and not calling out Slytherin right away, he could barely see further than a hand's breadth in front of himself, consciousness drawing in focusing on the word *Slytherin, Slytherin, Slytherin,* a mantra the hat began by merrily ignoring.

"Hmm," said the unsettling little voice right in his ear, which should not have been a surprise. He'd heard from his classmates that the hat talked, though it hadn't talked to him the first time. But it was ready to deliver a soliloquy now, more long-winded than Granger on the subject of *Hogwarts: A History*. "Difficult, very difficult. An unusual case, I see. Sorted before into Slytherin. From a Slytherin family, asking for Slytherin, with all the cunning and thirst to prove yourself that Salazar could ever have hoped. Once. Now, that lies there beaten down in the past. Yes, you would have fit Slytherin then nicely, though you have your fair share of book smarts. And somewhere, perhaps in you, waiting to be born- your own narrow kind of loyalty..."

Hurry it up, Draco thought intently through gritted teeth, *Just give me Slytherin, you glorified piece of surplus felt...*

He realized a second later that insulting the hat might not be the best way to get what he wanted, but he only heard it laugh in response, a laughter that sent a shiver down all his bones like one of the ghosts had flown through him. "Where do you belong now? You lack the courage of Gryffindor, the discernment and clear thought of Ravenclaw, the faith and good-heartedness of Hufflepuff. And the Slytherin House you so desire calls for a ruthlessness no longer alive in you. Do you belong anywhere at Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy?"

He could hear the Great Hall had gradually descended to a hush, as the sorting dragged on longer than even Longbottom's, then twice and thrice as long. Eye after eye set on Draco until he was nearly begging the Sorting Hat, *No, I know I don't, not here, not anymore, just put me in Slytherin so I can get to Severus, Slytherin, Slytherin...*

"Your father is Slytherin to the bone," the hat mused as if it had all the time in the world. "You wanted to be just like him once. And yet you despise him now. You fear him, but you hold him even more in contempt. Who will you become this time, with your rarest of second chances?"

I don't want to be a Slytherin like Father, Draco told it frantically, *Severus is a Slytherin, Professor Severus Snape, Potions but he should have the Defense job, my godfather, I want to be a Slytherin like Severus, just let me get to the dungeons to speak to Severus and this will all have just been a nightmare...*

Draco could hear people clearing their throats. When he glanced around, he could see a boy nearby whose name he couldn't remember, checking his enchanted watch. He almost wanted

to ask the boy how long it had been, but that did not seem like it would demonstrate an appropriate investment on his part in speeding the proceedings.

This is humiliating, Draco thought viciously towards the hat, only for the cursed thing to hum out, "This will take some time, yes, this will take quite some time..."

Draco wondered if Sectumsempra would be effective against magical creatures of a felt-based composition.

And that gave him inspiration. *I've done Dark Curses. The Unforgivables too. Many times. Even here now that I'm 11 again. I tortured people. I almost killed Katie Bell and Ron Weasley. I was chosen by the wand of Bellatrix Lestrange. Look at this morning and the snake I chopped to bits just because it was near my mother and tell me I'm not a Slytherin.*

Draco might as well have been reciting *The Tales of Beetle the Bard* in his head for all the good it was doing. The hat did not respond anymore, sitting so quiet that Draco feared his time travel-tainted mind had overworked the thing to the point of frying its virtual brain, with murmurs slowly starting up that Dumbledore had to raise a warning hand to quiet. Draco glanced backwards at the table and saw Dumbledore lowering his hand, and felt a surge of humiliation strong enough to make him feel a ghost of old hatreds. *I got Dumbledore killed. Why won't you just put me in Slytherin when I got your precious Gryffindor Dumbledore killed?*

It lasted far past that, long enough that any drop of the numbing potion in Draco's system felt to have trickled out. Long enough that Draco saw some of the Ravenclaws surreptitiously taking out books to read under the table, and people in every house whispering as surreptitiously as they could under Dumbledore's gaze. The whispers from the Slytherin table felt colder than the others, if a sound could be called cold.

Maybe it was only when the hat had finished rifling through his entire 18 years worth of memories that the hat spoke to him again. "What does it mean to you, Draco Malfoy, to be a Slytherin?"

Nothing, it doesn't mean a thing except being closer to Severus to get out of here- all your houses and this sorting is pointless, its only use is the creation of social expectations and hierarchies, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, you worthless old scarecrow-decorator, so sort me wherever you want, sort me Hufflepuff or bloody Gryffindor so long as you get me off this stool or Salazar be damned, I will take the wand that marks me as a Slytherin far better than your weak magic ever could and transfigure you to a chocolate bloody frog to eat because I'm hungry *from waiting so long for-*

"SLYTHERIN!" the hat announced, to no applause after so long a wait. Draco glanced furtively back at the staff table, but no one was clapping, not even Severus. He wondered if he had come close to setting a record. He didn't know whether the hat had finally given him Slytherin because he had somehow proved he deserved it, or just out of fear he follow through with the threat of chocolate frog transfiguration.

None of the Slytherins at the table were clapping, nor Pansy and Blaise or Theo still waiting to be sorted. Nor even was Potter, who had seemed to appoint himself some sort of advocate

for Draco with Weasley, but now appeared to have an appropriately Gryffindorish attention span. Draco almost took a seat between Vince and Greg before he had to look at Vince to, and his mind went all singsong *Fiendfyre, Fiendfyre*. He sat himself as far from them as possible without invading the knots of other years. The space for him between Vince and Greg was missing anyway.

He thought they were sore at him for ignoring them on the journey here, or out of a naturally appalled sensibility even their small minds could apprehend, at the infernal length of his sorting. But he was disabused of that notion when the Sorting ended and Vince scooted along the bench to hiss across the table, "Why didn't you come to my birthday party?"

Draco had a long moment then of questioning his sanity, before he remembered his dead friend's birthday had indeed fallen in August.

He could have told the truth, that he had been forbidden from leaving Malfoy Manor, but he leveled his most contemptuous stare at Vince instead. Unlike Potter and his new cronies, Vince had known him practically all his life, and unlike his parents, his pureblooded Slytherin acquaintances actually paid attention and listened to him. Best keep all the distance he could before Severus spirited him back to a time when Vince's ashes were somewhere indeterminate in this castle. "I had other things to do."

Theodore Nott poked his head in. "You didn't come when we were meant to play Quidditch either. Millie had to play Seeker. She's pants at Seeker."

"I had other things to do," Draco repeated, and found the resemblance between Theo at 11 and Theo at 15 was not strong enough to set his mind wandering to the hedges of Malfoy Manor, where Draco had learned how a Slytherin tasted for the first time. It was instead a reminder of Theo's father laughing as Draco performed the Cruciatus curse that hit him with whiplash clarity, at the sight of Theo watching Dumbledore's speech, uttering nonsense words with such cheerful magnanimity. Dumbledore was so carefree now, everyone was, with an idiotic lack of respect for the darkness awaiting. Draco felt like Mad-Eye Moody ready to shout *Constant vigilance*, perhaps at passing pigeons for all the good it would do. At least Dumbledore's weirdness provided distraction enough to empty the potion vial into his pumpkin juice, and down it as everyone else began to eat.

Once the plates before them piled with food, Draco wondered for the first time if Dobby had made it yet to Hogwarts to seek employment, and if he had been hired. Was the house elf's magic one of the dozens behind the disconcertingly colorful array of dishes, tied still to Malfoy Manor, and ready to watch over Harry Potter once Draco was gone? He presumed his real 11-year-old self would take up residence of his body again, optimally none the wiser, if he put his mind to the aftermath in this time, of the expulsion of his 18-year-old mind back to 1998. But those kinds of deductions gave him a headache.

It didn't help having Vince and Greg and Theo and everyone keeping at it, annoyingly curious about Draco's disappearance from planned social functions that past month. Bloodhounds on the scent of weakness, or at least gossip to write home to their parents about. You would think they had gotten enough material from a Sorting roughly the length of the First Wizarding War.

"What do you mean you had other things to do?" Vince kept asking. "What was so important that you couldn't come to my birthday? You didn't even send a present."

They had never used to whine at him this persistently, when he was showing it on his face that he wanted to be left alone. Time to make it clearer that if a Malfoy did not want to speak to you, you stopped speaking. "I was studying. Reading. Working with magic. I don't have time anymore for games." It had the merit, if they had heard any rumblings about Draco's real activities from their parents, of being pretty much true.

At least it didn't seem like it had gotten out about Aunt Bella's wand, because at least one of them would have already lost their composure and begged to see it.

"Why do you need to study so much already?" Theo asked, looking bizarrely hurt. This was already more than he had almost ever used to speak in a group setting. Poor little Theo seemed bewildered by the change in Draco. *There's no need for such a show of bereavement,* Draco thought irritably. *It won't be for years until my father's gone to Azkaban that I'll let you come round the Manor and stick your prick in me.*

"Draco?" Pansy prompted, touching his hand. Merlin, he'd forgotten how handsy she used to be. He removed his hand before coming up with the lie he'd half-heartedly devised during the Sorting, during a length of time he could well have memorized several epic poems or learned how to become an Animagus with a few minutes left for tea.

"Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable," Draco informed them, and received no surprise, only groans.

"Not that again," Blaise sighed. "Your father won't let you, Draco, so there's no point in studying time travel and all that rubbish for it."

"I'm going to be an Unspeakable," Draco told them all loftily, "So I will have no time to speak to my fellow children, and intend to dedicate myself exclusively to my studies in preparation for this difficult but illustrious occupation. I would appreciate it if you do not bother me further trying to interfere with my goals."

The trouble with his old acquaintances already knowing an 11-year-old him meant that Blaise and Theo had learned not to take him seriously. Blaise actually cracked up laughing, with a chuckle hard enough to upset his empty goblet of pumpkin juice and make it clatter, drawing the eyes of other Slytherins and some nearby Ravenclaws. Pansy elbowed Blaise in the ribs with daggers in her eyes, and Merlin, Draco had forgotten how big that pug nose had used to be for her scrunched-up face. "Everyone's looking at us now, Blaise," she hissed. "Even Harry Potter."

Draco turned towards the Gryffindor table at the far end of the Great Hall, and sure enough, Potter with his Weasel at his side was looking over at them, or more exactly at him, to judge by the way Potter's gaze cut through him once their eyes met. It felt as bad as facing his own reflection in a mirror he was not allowed to shatter. Looking to Potter's side was worse, because there nearby were the Weasley twins, both of them, together and whole.

"Leave me alone or I'll hex you," Draco warned, "All of you," and they frowned, even Blaise, though not seeming to take him seriously still.

"Do you know how long your Sorting lasted?" Theo whispered rather cuttingly at his side. "31 minutes and 12 seconds. I timed it."

Draco tried not to flinch. He was an 18-year-old survivor of war- well, cowering in his family manor *during* a war, more like, but still. He would not let himself be flustered by a crew of ignorant children.

Although half an hour was a very long time. And Father would hear about it.

When he looked over at the Gryffindor table, Potter was still watching. When he saw Draco was looking back, though, he finally looked away from him.

Dittany

It hurt too much to sleep.

He had been grateful for the vials of numbing potion from his mother. But they didn't last long, and now he would have preferred a Sleeping Draught, or Dreamless Sleep if he could come by it. Even with a Muffliato around his bed and a Spelunca Secure keeping the curtains closed as tightly as an imaginary room with virtual walls, he felt irrationally no less secure against observation or intrusion. He'd slept with more charms than these on his bedroom, in the months of Malfoy Manor's occupation, and still not felt safe, although any sane person would be more afraid of a great hideous rabid snake man and his merry band of lunatics than the looming unknown. But there had been comfort in a way, to knowing death likely to come so soon. And even the soul-thinning constant terror of Dementors outside insufficient walls had became monotonous too. He was more adrift than ever, in the same bed from seven years ago, protected by charms he hadn't known, kept awake by a worse pain than this young back had ever known, and fears he had never known either.

He had resolved to go see Severus as soon as possible, but it was very late by the time the prefects took them to the first-year dormitory. Not at all because of a certain unscheduled half-hour break in proceedings. Draco's own exhaustion as well as the hour made him judge it prudent to wait until tomorrow, when he could catch Severus more awake and likely in a better mood to deal with an unbelievable conundrum. Draco would go up to him after the Potions period on his schedule, and make an appointment to meet privately in Severus's chambers as they had a few times over the years in Draco's first time at Hogwarts. Then he would sit in one of those ugly but surprisingly comfortable leather armchairs before Severus's enchanted green fire and Draco would be unburdened of everything. Tomorrow.

He had thought himself exhausted, but he could never quite drop off all the way to sleep, shifting from position to position under the covers, kicking them off and then on, and finding each a bit more comfortable for a time. It was enough to convince himself maybe he could find sleep with each, only for any blissful drowsiness to be chased away by another stab of pain in his back.

Apart from internal injuries, likely negligible, the issue was how the skin had been broken, in a way beyond healing charms Draco knew, to the point he would have almost been better off with broken bones- he knew two different spells for that, but only Tergeo to clean the caked blood off his back, and nothing to make cuts go away. The scourging brush of Tergeo only made the stinging worse in its wake. He wondered if non-magically inflicted wounds were inherently more difficult to heal with magical means, not that he had anywhere near the knowledge of healing magic he should rightly have acquired, for someone who had spent so years surrounded by suffering and death. But Father and friends had been always more interested in teaching Draco how to *cause* that suffering.

If only he knew that healing spell Severus used on him in Myrtle's bathroom. That would have been something. As it was, he would have to just bear it. He didn't relish the idea of seeing Severus in Potions without sleep, let alone trying to hold himself together all day

under this steadily throbbing pain. Maybe once he saw Severus, he would have the nerve to ask for healing, to get rid of these marks before they got infected or scarred. But that prospect seemed unbearably far away.

He should not have let Severus go off and die that first time around, without teaching him that spell.

It hadn't just been the singing incantation that had lessened the pain from Potter's curse in sixth year, though. It had also been dittany, the herb itself rubbed into the wounds, said both to limit pain and scarring. He only ever saw much evidence of the first, but then, there was no telling how much worse the scars could have been without it. Severus hadn't begrudged him a liberal supply of it in the weeks that followed, turning a blind eye when he must surely have noticed dittany missing from his Potions storerooms and been able to guess the culprit as his godson.

In all six years at Hogwarts, Draco had not been in Severus's storeroom very often, but he had been allowed there more than most any other student. And he had never seen Severus to have changed that meticulous organization once. The dittany might be in the same place.

It was funny, how past a certain point even the most paralyzing inertia and cowardice could be forced into motion despite itself from sheer discomfort. He pulled a heavy Slytherin-green robe over his Slytherin-green silk pajamas- being sorted into any other house would have required an inconveniently large share of color-based transfiguration- and laced his trainers over his bare feet. A look around showed he hadn't woken any of the other boys, and he found sneaking out of the dormitory easier in this smaller body. He'd never been so undisciplined as to roam the halls after hours like this during first year, save in righteously tracking the illicit activities of Potter, but he had found reasons to in later years before he left Hogwarts for good.

None of the mental maps had faded with either an intervening year or the impossible snap backwards into his old body. He could have made his way through the many meandering labyrinthine paths between the dorms and the Potions area in pitch darkness. He did in all but that, dimming his Lumos to the minimum and letting the pathways be lit mostly by the pretty midnight blue glow of the lake, swimming over the walls sometimes from outside, or just the light of memory, his footsteps charmed silent. He tried to focus on the water's glow and not the aura of prolonged pain that felt like it was starting to envelop all around his body like a snare.

Severus had a standard Colloportus on the door to his stores, of course, as well as an anti-Alohomora charm and a few other less common spells, which had increased in number after some incidents with stealing in fourth year, but wouldn't be so plentiful now. Draco had found little trouble working around whatever was there, given the ease with which all of the charms personalized to Severus's blood could be bypassed by Draco just the same, with the magical blood connection of being named godson. He lifted his wand to the uninviting blank door and closed his eyes, then pressed the fingers of his left hand to the stone along with his wand, and whispered, "Draco Malfoy, godson to Severus Snape... Sanguirenere."

The door opened to him without any more exertion needed. He tried to increase the power of the Lumos slightly, which with Aunt Bella's wand of course meant a supernova, but he

managed to coax it down before he made his wincing, limping way around several sets of shelves and two corners right to the dittany. It had to be on a shelf low enough to make him bend, but he couldn't have everything. And he did find the herb mercifully bountiful in supply, given how early it was in the school year. He'd had vague half-formed fears about Professor Sprout and harvesting times in the Herbology greenhouses, but there the flowers were as perfect violet-pink as if fresh-picked. Draco took as much as he dared, whispering Diffindo each time to sever the flowers from the stems that he wanted, and then leaves from that stem, gathering the leaves careful not to crush them yet.

"Evanesco," he whispered, waving his wand widely to vanish the discarded plant parts that would be evidence, and was absurdly proud of himself for having managed not to let his overzealous wand vanish all the rest of the dittany with them. He thought maybe he should apply the dittany here and not in his bed, at least the first time, to make sure it would be enough or would even work with non-magical wounds. Perhaps he should look for any healing or sleeping varieties of potions he could find here that weren't up in the medical bay, if ransacking multiple areas wouldn't be pushing his luck too far. But Severus wouldn't expect a first-year to steal from him-

Draco straightened up and pocketed his pouch of dittany leaves, deciding to risk taking Dreamless Sleep from the shelves if he could find any, only to start backwards and nearly upend the entire shelf behind him when he saw the man he was robbing standing right behind him.

"Severus," he gasped, stumbling and steadying himself and the shelf before the worst came, though he dropped his wand in the process. Severus picked it up with an unreadable look on his Lumos-shadowed face, clad in the same billowing head-to-toe black robes it seemed he had been born and died in. Draco looked from Severus's face to his wand in Severus's hand and back to each again and knew he should be afraid with this tableau, and yet the most ridiculous urge to hug Severus was the feeling that surged up to dominate in him, the need to seize Severus and scream *You're alive, you're alive, thank you, I'm sorry...*

He reached for his most formidable Occlumency shields. Not that he felt Severus trying to poke at his mind. Just regarding him with that unimpressed, expectant expression more fearsome than screaming or threats could ever be.

Merlin, Draco had missed him.

"Did you imagine," Severus finally began, when Draco did not start stammering the apologies one might have expected, "That you could steal from my stores and not get caught?"

The last three words of the question were dragged out like individual threats in their own right, Severus's atonal musical intonation intimately associated with the heat and smells of potion-making forever in Draco's hindbrain. Hearing them made Draco feel like some Celestina Warbeck superfan witnessing her strike up one of her greatest hits in concert for the first time.

That was, if that singer had also recently suffered a death and resurrection.

It almost made Draco laugh, imagining Severus's horror should he catch an inkling of how elated Draco was to be menaced by him again.

"I don't know-" Draco broke off before calling him Severus again. "I don't know, sir."

Severus wasted only a few more seconds staring at him searchingly with that hawk-like face before turning his attention to Draco's wand. The sight of it in the hand of almost anyone else would have sent Draco alight with panic, even if it was Father or Mother, but not Severus. "Did you believe," Severus intoned, expressiveness now flattened in each word to form a tunnel-like incision of curt superiority, "That your new proclivity for unsupervised magical experimentation would have passed unknown to me, *Draco*? Did you believe it would surprise me, for you to make use of that brief foolishness that allowed your mother to persuade me to be named your godfather, in order to get yourself into further situations of disrepute? And did you believe I would not make precautions to detect such stupidity on your part?" Yes, Draco should have considered that. The thought of Father being the one to warn Severus of Draco's unseemly behavior was less amusing than his own folly, but it was worth a great deal of unpleasantness for the privilege of having Severus insult him again. "I am not surprised, Draco. Not surprised in the least. Only that you would be so brazen as to attempt such idiocy on the very first night."

In the middle of the night, caught stealing with two wands pointed at him, his back on fire, seven years before his own time- and yet Severus's sibilance, rising from calculated dullness to a crescendo of perfectly pitched disdain, felt like being washed in sunlight.

Safe, Draco thought, staring up with treacherous hope threatening to spark. *Safe.* For the first time since taking the Mark, he could think the word of himself and feel it true, because he had made it to scowling oily-haired Severus, viciously unpleasant as ever. He had made it to safety.

"Professor," Draco said evenly, trying to think how 11-year-old Draco would have responded to such vitriol- definitely with at least some proportion of cowering- but there wasn't any point keeping up the facade, now that he could do what he had waited a month for and let another living soul in on the truth. "Professor, that all- it doesn't matter. I needed to speak with you anyway. As soon as I could. I have something I need to tell you. Something important. Something happened to me a month ago- something-"

He didn't know how to begin. He should have planned this out in more detail, except he'd expected to have until sometime tomorrow with the sting of the cuts on his back gone. "Something that made me- different. I'm not the person you knew anymore." Not that Draco had known Severus extremely well before he came to Hogwarts, but the godson that Severus had met at least a few times a year growing up had virtually ceased to exist in this body. "I have a secret, and you're the only one here I can trust to tell, just you-"

"Dispense with these grandiose proclamations, Draco," Severus said, with an almighty roll of his eyes, and a stylish, sweeping flip back of his robe sleeve that Draco had tried and never quite managed to replicate. "I know exactly of what you speak. Kindly spare me any further equivocation."

"You- you do?" Draco heard his childish voice go even higher and thinner in disbelief, because he knew Severus was brilliant, but he hadn't thought he could figure it out so quickly without Draco telling him some of it. Had his Legilimency pierced Draco's mind earlier, perhaps in that agonizing stretch with the Sorting Hat, without Draco realizing? Had all of Draco's secrets already been delivered on a platter, and it only awaited to follow whatever instructions Severus saw fit to get him home? Could Severus already have a plan in place to fix this? "I should have known you would, sir."

Severus eyed him with an infinitely cool remoteness, assessment seeming to end there, before offering Draco back his wand. "This wand, Draco. Even if I had not already been told the story of your mistake, do you think I could look at this misshapen twig and not recognize the stench of Bellatrix Lestrange on the walnut?"

Disappointment surged through Draco as surreal and absurd a deflation as a thousand children's balloons at once: every fanciful animal shape he remembered from Vince's eleventh birthday party he hadn't attended this time around, finding their place inside his chest, only to get popped and unceremoniously blown away, indistinguishable from scraps of rubbish without the air in them. "Yes, Professor," Draco said quietly, and took his wand back from him.

"What," Severus hissed, leaning down to cast his malignant stare more exactly on Draco's disappointed face, "What, boy, were you ever thinking, to take up this wand as your own?"

Draco felt a thrum of pain surge through his back, and had to struggle not to grab his knees and hunch over. "I didn't know whose it was. I still don't know what it means to have someone else's wand, even Aunt Bella's-" *Aunt Bella* earned a twitch of the eyebrow from Severus, for what had perhaps been a slip of the tongue on Draco's part, to speak of her with familiarity. But what was he supposed to call his mother's sister? The Dread Dark Witch Lestrange? "Except that it won't tend to work as well, but this wand works better than-" *Than my last one,* he almost said. "Than any ever has for me before," he finished lamely. "Just- harder to control its power. But is there something evil about the wand, sir? Does some of the personality, or the dark magic, or the legacy of the deeds it committed linger in it? Or is it just wrong to use, if Aunt Bella might get out of Azkaban someday and want it back?" Best to be *clear* out of the past by then.

"You will not," Severus groaned, disdain bleeding through more and more clearly as he straightened up, "Suddenly be possessed by someone else's magic or personality through their wand, Draco, however dark they were. If your father has been feeding your mind with such nonsense, speedily disabuse yourself of it. It is the *wand* that has a personality of its own- a magic that chose Bellatrix and has now chosen you. A jealous magic, it would seem, by your father's rendition of your Squib-like performance with any other wand."

Severus snorted mirthlessly at Draco's surprised look. "Yes, Draco, your father saw fit to consult me in wake of these events, on the misguided notion that there might be some *potion* to sever the bond." The contempt for that notion was stronger in his voice than it had even been for Draco. "There is not. *Naturally*. I could only advise him, as I will advise you, that your magic may grow strong enough in time- perhaps two or three years, and likely by the time you are grown, to at least make some use of other wands." Or not so likely, given that

Draco already happened to be grown, but he appreciated the show in faith in him. "But that at your delicate age, with your magic so thoroughly entangled with this wand, the only solution that remains is to make use of what you have been given and wait."

"Oh," Draco said softly, staring at his feet in a shame for his transgression that he had never felt an ounce of when faced with his father. "I'm sorry, sir."

"A curious situation," Severus mused, "For this wand to have chosen you, Draco, and at such a young age. One would never have expected your magic to have the strength." Draco feared for a frozen moment that Severus's logic was leading him on the track of his secret, before reminding himself that he meant to tell Severus anyway, any second now. But Severus was already moving on. "None of that is sufficient explanation, not even to speak of justification, for further covert activity surrounding *potions.* What is it of mine, Draco Malfoy, that you have in your *pocket*?"

Severus wouldn't have seen which of the herbs and flowers on the shelf Draco had taken. With a more humiliating sort of shame, Draco produced the pouch and handed it over to Severus. "Well-cut," Severus observed with a frown, before bringing one of the leaves to his hooked nose and sniffing it. Nothing on the shelf was toxic. Nor did it take more than a second for both of those eyebrows to raise, contemptuous poise on that familiar face changing to something more clouded. "Dittany." He stared for a long moment at the first-year before him, then instructed, "Follow me."

Draco did. He knew the way to Severus's chambers without being led, and the sight of that charmed flame in the high serpentine fireplace, less grand and yet somehow dearer, turning green once and then more intensely at the entrance of two Slytherins- he felt his throat choke up, enough that he was grateful to be guided to the old leather armchair he remembered so well. But he was not left there for long. "Show me," Severus said simply, and with a sinking heart, Draco took off his robe and pajama shirt before turning to show Severus the marks on his back, on the calculation that the further humiliation of their display would be worth the amelioration Severus could deliver, and that Severus had seen through him regardless already.

He heard Severus draw in a sharp breath, sounding more surprised than Draco would have expected. Then, he supposed that Father had never been so immoderate as to deliver such a beating anywhere close to Draco's returns to Hogwarts. Strange as it was, he had only once turned to Severus for help with an injury, and Draco hadn't had much to do with being saved from Potter's curse, just laid there and tried to die. "What caused these?" Severus asked with a briskness Draco appreciated.

"A cane," Draco answered honestly, "I mean- a walking stick," which effectively confirmed the perpetrator, but it wasn't like Severus wouldn't have guessed. "This morning."

"Have these abrasions been treated?" Severus asked, still business-like, and Draco shook his head, glad that the location of the wounds meant he didn't have to look Severus in the eye.

"No, only- my mother gave me two vials of numbing potion," Draco admitted, "I'm already out," and heard Severus heave one of those long sighs of his that seemed to contain all the disappointment of untold centuries within its stretch. "Do you think it will scar?"

"Hence the dittany," Severus said, amusement creeping into his voice for the first time, which made Draco's chest feel warm. It was always a triumph to make Severus laugh or so much as crack a half-smile, even if this was at his own expense. "Of course. Vain boy."

"And for the pain," Draco added reluctantly. "Doesn't it help with that as well?" He tried to sound brave, but failed as usual, and his voice cracked as he said, "It hurts, sir."

"One can imagine," Severus added dryly, and then it began, the lilting humming sound of that song Draco only remembered in blurry swatches of light, the feel of water pouring over him and blood pouring out but Severus's strong presence smelling of bitter herbs there above him meaning safety from death even if he did not entirely want it. The song went on less time than it had for the wounds from Sectumsempra, naturally, though Draco remembered it being performed three times in succession. The first time to stop any bloodflow, the second to clear the residue- Draco had surely only worsened that part with his inept Tergeo charm- and the third to finally stitch the rent skin back together. The explanation Severus had delivered back then came in pieces to him, though he had barely listened, outrage as much as agony too dominant in him to listen much to the answer to his haughty question why Severus had to keep doing this over and over by the third time. Like the first time, Severus waited between each time, an impatient stretch in which the sting was still there right on the outmost layer of skin, but lessening with each sound Severus made.

"You were right to pick dittany," Severus informed him, and squeezed some of the leaves into a paste before carefully applying them by hand to the closed wounds. Draco bit back a gasp of further pain, and focused instead on the touch, the surreal physical proof that Severus was indeed alive and instructing him in Potions again, if he couldn't have that hug he had first imagined as confirmation. "You should have one of your friends apply it each night for a week, and then return to me to check it." Draco's ostentatious silence at that told its own story. "Too proud to show one of your friends these marks, Draco?"

"I don't have any friends," Draco said sullenly, "But I can put it on myself," and Severus did laugh aloud then.

"No change in you, is there, vain boy," Severus mused, "Still so infernally dramatic," and finished the application. Draco dressed himself and turned in the chair, almost delirious with the relief now of the healing and herbs- the pain far from absent still, but surely now he could at least sleep- and Severus was waving him away with an imperious hand.

"Go on, Draco, back to your friends," Severus ordered, "And don't think if you get caught sneaking back in that I'll protect you," and had Draco clambering to his feet before he remembered.

"Wait," Draco said, "Please, wait, I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, just one more thing-"

What was he meant to say?

I'm really 18, but I'm back in my old body, and I need your help getting back so that Harry Potter can kill a resurrected Voldemort without me messing everything up?

More simply, *Bring me a Pensieve, and trust the memories are real and that I haven't just been bewitched or gone mad from this wand or something my father did?*

Or just, *Here's my mind, Occlumency shields down, cast Legilimens and let me show you how we killed Albus Dumbledore together, beloved godfather?*

Want to see how you die? Want to help me make sure it happens exactly the same all over again?

"What?" Severus barked, impatient at any unnecessary delay, and Draco couldn't tell him.

"Can I have a sleeping potion?" he asked meekly, and was grudgingly granted a vial of Murtlap Essence to apply to help with the pain, and no Dreamless Sleep at all.

He would tell Severus. Just- later. After his wound had healed enough for his mind to be clear, and his story to be convincing. It would be better to wait until then, or Severus would never believe him. It was the right thing to do, to wait.

The Malfoy and the Mudblood

Chapter Notes

Hi! In answer to questions, the plan is to do years 1-7, and I intend to update every other day :)

"Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable."

That became Draco's mantra, every time the other Slytherins asked him why he didn't want to go outside with them, or play a game of exploding snap, or go exploring the castle, or go try and watch the Giant Squid at the windows in the common room. No, he couldn't, he had to study, because he was going to be an Unspeakable. *Why are you acting so different, Draco? Why are you spending so much time in the library? Why are you so quiet? Why do you study all the time? Why don't you have any friends? Why are you no fun anymore?*

"Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable." Over and over, until maybe they would get the message, and the first-year Slytherins would do what everyone in all the other houses and years did, and leave the quiet scowling Malfoy boy alone.

"It's just a phase," Blaise would proclaim. "He'll snap out of it, just like last year, and then he'll let you two follow him around again." This proved little comfort to Vince and Greg, who seemed inconsolable for the first several days of term, before starting to follow a bemused Blaise around instead. It was harder to explain to Theo, the other studious boy in their dorm, why Draco had no interest in spending time studying with Theo either, but turn him down enough times and Theo got the message. Soon, Draco started to see Madam Pince more than his fellow Slytherins, coming to meals late until Severus put a stop to that, and then leaving as early as he could.

Draco defended his table at the library like Nagini defending Voldemort, a long narrow chestnut table near the Defense section which even students in upper years learned over time was Draco's. He would stand there still and glowering long enough for anyone who had wandered there by mistake to get the message and leave it to him, and level the same stare at anyone fool enough to try and sit down with him.

It wasn't just that he was terrified, not only of exposure but of just about everything and everyone around him. The one time he saw Cedric Diggory sitting at his table, he was so shocked he dropped his bag full of heavy books right on the Hufflepuff's foot, and just stood there trembling until his mates glared at Draco and dragged Diggory away. No, it was that he had work to do, jump-starting research of his return, to give Severus to help once he told him. Work that would be easier if Severus had just given him a pass to the Restricted Section as requested- a ridiculous denial, given that the Manor had more dark texts freely available than Hogwarts could dream of. But no, Severus wanted to know the exact books he wanted, and

when Draco told him *Whatever I can find about time travel*, his explanation of "Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable" got him nothing but kicked out of Severus's office for wasting his time. Draco's attempts to come study in Severus's office or chambers or hang around looking for extra Potions tutoring received similarly blunt dismissals.

He didn't really like studying in the open in the library, nor using it for continued writing in ever-expanding memory notebooks, which had a roughly matching set now of seven Important Subject notebooks entitled Time Travel, Magical Artifacts, Potions, Dark Arts, Healing, Occlumency, and Blood Magic. Even with his special ink keeping what he was writing hidden, he would have preferred full privacy for it. And there was the Room of Requirement, which he talked himself into visiting in the empty hour before Astronomy on Tuesday at midnight, knowing it would prove a perfect office for his dual goals of gathering pertinent information on his insanely stupid situation, and staying out of the way to avoid changing the timeline or getting unmasked.

The Room was unburnt and untarnished, just as he remembered it in sixth year down to the Vanishing Cabinet. Putting one foot a step in, though, sent him into one of those gasping and crying fits of his so violent he lost a point for Slytherin, for lateness to Astronomy. He lost another for his inattention, when it was all he could do not to start panting and heaving up his dinner at just setting foot in the Astronomy Tower. He won the points back and then some in Herbology the next day, though, when an impressed Professor Sprout gave him five points for being the first one to correctly write down on his parchment all the names of the fungi they were identifying. It was almost as if Draco had been taught the lesson before.

The only other major exploration he made was to the kitchens, where he found house elves to pester about their current roster. No one had even heard of a Dobby. He suppressed the anxiety that sent whirling up like a cold flame fitting to the cavity of his lungs. Just because Dobby wasn't here yet didn't mean he would never be, or that he wouldn't still find a way to do his job and protect Potter when the time came. That elf was a Gryffindor if he had ever met one.

At least in his first week, while he waited for his back to fully heal so he could confess his secret to Severus, he managed to avoid any and all Gryffindors. That helped keep his life boring. So boring, in fact, that he looked forward to visits to the library, the highlights of his day except for the rare times Severus would deign to speak to him a little, before shooing him. Reading the books he chose was fascinating in comparison to redoing the lessons from first year. Especially once he came to the realization that in order not to draw attention, he would have to avoid showing off with those. There wasn't much real glory anyway, in a seventh-year being the best in a class full of first-years.

He made a few token attempts to feign ineptitude, which turned out harder than it sounded. Eventually, he saw the risk of drawing more attention by bad acting, and changed to lowkey uninvolved mode, buried at the back of each classroom when they were allowed to choose their seats. *I am a ghost*, Draco willed everyone around him to understand. *Except not as talkative or as interesting, and not as dangerous unless you try and sit at my table in the library.*

He avoided Gryffindors until their first shared class, Double Potions on Friday morning. He remembered Severus's classes as a highlight of his week, both from the impressiveness of Severus in his brooding theatrical element, mastery of his art apparent for anyone with brains, and from the even higher theater that had been Severus's continuous persecution of brainless Gryffindors. Draco's anticipation was tempered, though, by the realization he would have to spend a considerable time in the same room as Harry Potter. Yes, they had both been in the Great Hall, and with Potter craning his neck in Draco's direction once or twice, but that barely counted. This did, and though Draco timed his arrival to avoid socializing before the start of class, he still felt increased proximity to Potter as an infinitely self-proliferating wound, trapped by late arrival into one of the nearest desks to the Gryffindors, which meant nearer to his least favorite person alive.

Said least favorite visibly lit up upon the sight of Draco and waved an excited hand, which he would never get used to. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to. In one small mercy, Severus had not yet arrived to witness that humiliating address, which set Pansy and Millie to his right tittering. Severus's grand entrance saved him the problem of how to respond to Potter's friendliness. And Severus then was like returning to an old photograph you hadn't looked at in some time, the same series of motions by the same person in the same place- a place you couldn't return to, so you had put the photograph away. The photograph slammed the door and spoke in stirring tones about the glory of potionmaking and the dunderheadedness of his usual students. And then-

"Potter!" Severus hissed, rounding on him. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?" Potter and Weasley looked as baffled as the first time, and Granger as obnoxiously eager to answer for him. When Potter said he didn't know, and Severus coolly mocked him for it in front of the entire class, Draco heard many of the Slytherins around him start to laugh, Vince and Greg ever the least subtle. He remembered the good laugh it had given him before, to see the arrogant Chosen One terrorized in that splendidly macabre fashion no one but his godfather could pull off quite so well.

It came off as empty now, though- not just because it was boring when you had seen it before, but because it was just as pointless as any of the rest of the plethora of useless childhood rituals that animated Hogwarts. This was only posturing. Word had spread after Severus's death of his alignment always being with Potter's side, of the many times he had saved Potter's life, along with even a truly dispiriting rumor from Draco's own mother, about Severus having some unrequited flame for Saint Potter's ginger-haired Mudblood mother. So it wasn't fooling Draco, and by the time they set to work on their boil-clearing potions, Draco was glad to be done with it.

Severus stopped beside his cauldron, and Draco forced up a smile. Blaise's absence from a bad cold had left the Slytherins at an odd number. "I'm fine to work alone, sir," Draco said, and the gaze cast on Draco then was almost worried. *Don't worry, Severus. I wasn't failing to laugh because I'm morbid and depressed, it was just that your false hatred of Potter doesn't amuse me as much anymore.*

"You're going so fast, Draco," Pansy simpered up towards him before long. "How are you so good already?"

Draco looked up from his snake fangs with the other first-years still on nettle-weighing, and forced some semblance of an expression onto his face. *Because I received an O on my Potions OWLs, you simpering sycophant, and if put to sit the NEWTs in my old cell in Azkaban, I'd still feel bound to get an O in Potions on that too, or my godfather would turn so much in his grave, they'd all think he'd been buried alive.* "Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable."

"What's an Unspeakable?" Granger asked brightly, having finished weighing her nettles and waiting for the Gryffindors around her to go on the next step. "Is it a kind of Dark wizard?"

Draco could feel Potter and Weasley looking up to listen. That hardly boded well for the outcome of their potion, which already looked doubtful on the basis of their preparation so far. But if Draco remembered right, the only one who'd managed to truly muck things up in this class had been Longbottom, as per usual. "You can read about it in a book if you like. I have a potion to focus on, which is very important I get right, because I'm going-"

"'Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable'," Pansy said solemnly, imitating Draco's turn of phrase, and both girls dissolved into helpless laughter. Granger looked unbearably frustrated to be left out of the loop, with Slytherin all knowing something she didn't. Draco hurried his potion along, adding the first ingredients to the cauldron, before taking his horned slugs out from where they had stewed to add in turn. Severus had told him once that stewed slugs did not need to be rested as long as the books would say, if the cauldron was of high enough quality, and the stirring in done delicately enough. So it was just stirring after boring stirring he could have done in his sleep, feeling he would rather be taking his NEWTs than insulting his intelligence with such menial labor, while ignoring Pansy's attempts to pester him for advice.

Severus stopped by his cauldron, narrowed his eyes at his ingredients all already in the cauldron, but could no doubt read in the spreading blue the perfect electric green that the potion would turn out to be. That left Draco amusing himself recalling Longbottom's face back then- he could remember the old Longbottom more clearly now- as panicked as if the sky was falling when his potion overflowed. He reflexively pulled his shoes up, remembering how the soles had been ruined, and that gave him an idea. This was no real test, but he could conduct another experiment. To what extent could he change the past, if only in something this small?

From there on out, he watched Longbottom and Finnigan like a hawk, stirring his own potion mechanically. Sure enough, the moment came when Finnigan barked for Longbottom to add the nettles already, and panicking, Longbottom like the suicidal idiot he was swept them up along with the porcupine quills beside them to dump in the cauldron. "Longbottom, stop!" Draco barked, loud enough to turn heads around them. Longbottom dropped the ingredients so awkwardly they fell all over his robes, sending nearby Slytherins into fits of laughter. "No quills!"

"What quills?" went Longbottom, while Finnigan glowered at Draco like a willful saboteur.

"The porcupine quills," Draco explained with a patience that deserved an Order of Merlin. He was not about to let Gryffindor stupidity ruin his time travel experiment. "The ones the instructions in the book told you to put aside. It's because they're not supposed to go into the

potion until the fire has cooled. Adding them will make your whole cauldron melt and cover you in boils." Longbottom began to frantically pluck and toss nettle quills off himself like they were eating him alive, and Draco wanted to tear his hair out. This was worse than trying to help Vince and Greg pass their Transfiguration OWLs. "No, not the quills, Longbottom, the quills won't do anything to you by touching them. The potion will, *if* you add the quills to it. When exposed to a running boil, the quills will interact with the heated stewing solution for the slugs and cause a corrosive reaction. Just clean yourself off and do the nettles and quills separately again." Dazed, Longbottom began to try and obey, while Finnegan eyed him oddly.

"Are you messing with us?" Finnigan asked, and Draco shook his head wanly.

"Hardly, Finnigan," Draco said in his most clipped, unfriendly manner. "I just happen rather not to fancy a nearby spill ruining the leather of my third-best shoes."

"Well, uh, thanks, er... thank you," Finnigan trailed off, and Draco realized with a blast of mortification that the Gryffindor didn't even know Draco's name back. That was what keeping a low profile did.

Although he seemed to have compromised it with this experiment, to judge by the way the class had quieted to observe Draco's emergency instruction.

Severus appeared at Longbottom's elbow. "Excellent, Mr. Malfoy. Quick thinking. Ten points to Slytherin for averting certain disaster." The malicious enunciation of the words *certain disaster* made Draco's face split into an ear-to-ear grin, only to hold back a laugh when Severus snarled down, "Five points from Gryffindor for dangerous incompetence." He seemed to have finished, only to whirl back around with an elegant flick of the sleeve that had half of Gryffindor house jumping in their seats. "You- Potter- why weren't you the one to tell your fellow Gryffindor not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

Weasley kept Potter from retorting, only for Snape to sweep away and Potter to turn towards Draco pleadingly, as if Severus was his fault, or it had been Draco's own actions to lead to this blow to Gryffindor. He could have told Potter that if he knew Severus, he would understand that anything Draco had done in that situation, from kissing Longbottom's feet to stripping naked and whistling the Marseillaise, would still have been grounds somehow to take another point off Potter for it. So he just kept a watchful eye on his own potion, completed to a satisfying electric green, as well as Longbottom's. The period of the most danger had passed, and the first Potions class concluded without a single spill or explosion. Draco watched Longbottom like a hawk as Severus went around grading their Potions, damned if he would let the boy's clumsiness ruin what was proving to be a success in altering some part of the past. Even if this was hardly consequential enough for a rational person to count it. But it was better than nothing.

Not that he wanted to change the past. That would be insane. Far too much of a risk, liable to end in disaster in every particular. He only wanted to keep it the same and get back to his mother in his own time. She would be needing him-

"Look over here, children," Severus commanded, voice rendering all twenty children perfectly attentive and silent. "Observe the color of this potion. This is the color yours should have been." It was only towards the Gryffindors who had come over to see that Severus turned his last withering remark, never missing an opportunity to turn Slytherin success to Gryffindor failure. "It seems two of you cannot equal the work of one of Mr. Malfoy."

Draco looked down to hide how wide his smile remained, so full it almost hurt his cheeks.

Merlin, they hadn't all had to come gawp so much, though, some remaining craning their necks even after Severus swept past. Granger was jotting down notes frantically, as if she could somehow capture the precise color in words. Severus could have just told them all to try and get their potion the color of Potter's excessively green eyes.

While one experiment in changing the past had succeeded, and Draco's third-best leather shoes had been salvaged, this first major lapse in blending in since the Sorting Hat debacle was not to be without its own damages. Worse ones, even, than Longbottom's stuttered attempts at thanking him the next few times he saw him. The bliss Draco felt arriving in the library after Herbology with Ravenclaw was short-lived when his table was infested by undesirables, alerted by his wand almost seeming to thrum and get hotter in his pocket. Namely an undesirable Mudblood, who dropped a tome the size of a cauldron on the table before dramatically opening it.

"An Unspeakable," Granger read from *Ministers of Magic*, "Is a witch or wizard employed by the Department of Mysteries. They are an autonomous division within the Ministry of Magic and the only division that does not answer to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. They are called Unspeakables because they are forbidden from-"

"Yes, Granger, you have successfully demonstrated your ability to read," Draco interrupted with a groan. "Congratulations."

"You told me to look in a book," Granger said, in a whisper brimming over with frustrated curiosity, "But I did, and all it says about what an Unspeakable is, is that it's not allowed to say it."

"Hence the name," Draco drawled, and Granger narrowed her big brown eyes at him and sat down across the table in a growing huff.

"The Dark Lord was called He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," she argued, "Which is similar, but we're allowed to speak about him, just not say the name. And you must have found out somewhere. How do *you* know what they are?"

This was already the longest remotely civil conversation he had ever held with Hermione Granger. He was losing his mind. But it seemed giving her answers was the only way to shut her up. "Didn't you hear what Weaselby was on about in that boring boat ride? My parents are wizards, Granger." Strangely, he found it less difficult than he would have thought to hold back from addressing Granger as Mudblood, after he'd watched Aunt Bella carve the word into her arm. "Not Muggles. They've taught me things like that."

"So what is an Unspeakable?" Granger asked eagerly, unperturbed.

"Just people who do secret research into experimental and, well, mysterious magic. Things like time travel and prophecies." Would that get this bushy-haired creature to vacate his table?

It would not. "Oh, like Divination?" Granger frowned, closing and putting aside the book on the Ministry and opening *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1*. "That's rather disappointing. From what I've read, it sounds like quite an inexact science. I'm surprised you spend so much time studying in the library if that's what you're interested in."

Quite the charmer, this girl. "They're not called mysteries because they're easy for simple minds to appreciate, Granger. Now if you're quite finished, I'd like to get back to my work." He looked back at his notebook where he had been jotting down notes from *The Lethal Art of Legilimency,* only to tense up when there was no indication of the Mudblood leaving. "Granger?"

Granger looked up from her Charms textbook. "Yes?" she asked with perfect innocence.

Draco scowled at her, wondering how many people had already seen them sitting together, and if word would get to his father. Not to mention that anything he said or did she could report to Potter. "You're still at my table." She nodded, and Draco put some of Severus's drawling coolness into his voice as he stressed the word, "Why?"

Granger's buck teeth set stubbornly over her lip. "It's not *your* table. I can sit where I like." She looked around the vicinity before turning back to him, gaze somewhat more conciliatory. "And- there's no empty tables."

Meaning she had no one to sit with. It figured. Back in first year, the sight of Potter and Weasley deigning to set foot in a library had been rare indeed. "Go fraternize with your own kind." He gestured indistinctly in the direction of the miniature versions of Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown nearby, thinking how a werewolf attack had rather improved Brown's looks.

Granger looked confused. "Girls?"

"*Gryffindors*," Draco corrected with far more distaste. Granger just looked more determined to stay put if the indicated parties were the alternative.

"I won't ask any more questions. I'm not here to socialize," she insisted, lower lip quivering alarmingly. "I just need a place to study, same as you."

It seemed absurd, until Draco considered that if he had the choice between sitting with Lavender Brown and a resurrected Nagini, he might well prefer the snake.

It had become more effort than it was worth to dislodge the unexpectedly stubborn Mudblood, especially if she decided to make a scene. At least she exceeded his expectations by staying true to her word and not bothering him further, as engrossed in her own studying as he was. He caught a curious glance at his invisible ink, but she didn't ask.

He should have known that circumspection had been calculated. He assumed it a freak incident, never to repeat, but Granger took up the habit of inserting herself at his table each

time they were both at the library, which was every day. And when Draco got up early on Wednesday morning before classes and went into the library before his dormmates were even up, an already present Mudblood left her perfectly empty table to meet him at his.

"Good morning," Granger said politely, rocking the surface of the table with a pile of books a third as tall as she, and Draco felt his jaw drop towards the floor. She couldn't use the excuse there was nowhere else to sit now.

"Granger?" he breathed, looking around to see if there were some Weasleys lurking around nearby abetting some sort of prank. "Why in Salazar's name are you sitting here?"

"I sat here yesterday," she said as if it was explanation enough, and unfurled a parchment which she pinned flat over her side of the table. When she caught his stare, she eagerly added, "I know the first Charms essay isn't due for weeks, but really, it's never too early to begin research, is it? There's so much *history* behind the current iteration of the Levitation charm-"

"Why are you sitting with *me*?" Draco hissed. "I'm a Slytherin."

And a Malfoy and a Death Eater and a traitor and a coward.

Granger lifted her chin defiantly. "I've seen you at the library every day since arriving at Hogwarts. I've been here daily as well, of course. You seem serious about your studies and becoming an Unspeakable." She spoke the word as authoritatively if she had known its meaning forever, and not had to painfully wrestle it from him just yesterday. "And I don't know if you've noticed, but I haven't seen anyone else in our year who seems to be taking their studies nearly as seriously as you and I are, don't you think?"

Draco stared at her with a dawning horror that had to bleed through on his face. Could the Mudblood be trying to *befriend* him? That went beyond a cauldron spilling over to potentially changing the past significantly. He'd been stressing over the fate of Dobby for Potter's sake. But that was nothing in comparison to Granger, who had served the whole time he'd known her as Potter's portable roving cerebrum, in the absence of one in either the Chosen One or his Chosen Weasel. Much as it stung to admit her value, the even slightly more frequent absence of the freakishly smart Mudblood from the side of her two wandering blunderbusses could lead to unforeseen injury or death to one or both. Gryffindors were liable to get themselves killed just, say, climbing the moving staircases, because racing down at full pelt without noticing which staircase it was or whether it had vanishing steps was *the braver thing to do.* Suffering Granger's company was not just implausibly unpalatable, it was a change to the past he could not afford.

He could have asked Severus, if he had let him into his confidence yet. But he had set his back getting fully better as the time of disclosure, and the wounds had not yet healed.

Well. Not *entirely.*

"I'm not asking to marry you, Draco," she said crossly. "Just to study together sometimes, we're the brightest in our year, it only makes *sense*."

Draco tried to summon some of that false bravado he thought remained in him, the facsimile of cruelty he used to bark at Vince and Greg to leave him alone in class or the common room, though even that harshness now seemed to leave the pair nothing but mildly bemused. "Come on, Granger. Listen to me-"

"We shouldn't be talking so much in the library," she complained, and Draco gave her a hard look before stalking behind some back stacks of Herbology dictionaries. She followed rather anxiously, her own bravado starting to strain. "What? You know it would be helpful for both of us-"

"Granger, you're Muggleborn," Draco hissed, and she reacted to that no more insightfully than if he had proclaimed she was Hermione Granger. "And I'm a pureblood. Both my parents are from lines of wizards going back centuries and centuries. Houses Malfoy and Black." Again, no reaction. "Don't you know what that means?"

Her lower lip started to quiver again. "It means you've had a head start on me in studying magic and magical history," she said loftily, "But I can assure you I've already learned-"

"It means we can't be friends," Draco said impatiently, "I can't be seen with you, because you're a- because you're Muggleborn."

"Oh," Granger said, crossing her arms and looking more interested than upset. "Is that a prejudice in the Wizarding World? A preference for purer magical bloodlines? I suppose that does accord well with some policies I read of from Salazar Slytherin in *Hogwarts: A History.*"

She spoke as if it was some mildly interesting historical factoid, no more significant than the chronological order of different Goblin wars. As if it would have no greater effect on her life. She had a pureblood friend in the Weasel, so she ought to have known all this already, if only for her own protection. That was, if her friend cared a jot about her- which he should, if all the stories in the Daily Prophet of post-war snogging had been accurate. But when he remembered calling Granger a Mudblood for the first time in second year, she hadn't reacted much, though Weasley had. Perhaps Draco had been the one to teach her that word the first time, and would be the second time too.

"Granger," Draco said, rubbing his eyes in disbelief. This could not have come on a worse morning, the one after Astronomy, which for a second week running had kept him awake half the night with persistently horrid nightmares. "This is important for you to know. To be *wary* of. People in the Wizarding world, powerful people, think purebloods are superior, especially to *your* kind. They'll look down on you for your birth and call you a Mudblood, and you'll be lucky if they don't do worse."

"Mudblood," Granger repeated, with an intellectual sort of curiosity that showed a complete lack of self-preservation or perspective, attesting to well-fittedness for Gryffindor over Ravenclaw. "Is that some variety of racial or ethnic slur?" Draco nodded, and there was before his eyes, for a moment, not the image of this bushy-haired little squirrel of a girl peering inquisitively at him, but the pretty bedraggled teenage witch screaming on the floor of Malfoy Manor, while his aunt sat atop her carving into her skin *Mudblood.* "How fascinating. It sounds similar to racism in Muggle terms."

"What's racism?" Draco asked blankly, and Granger looked pleased to know something he didn't for once.

"It's a common form of prejudice among Muggles," she told him rather smugly, "Which discriminates against certain people because of their ethnic background or the color of their skin."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "That's barbaric. Muggles are so-"

"They're rather similar, don't you think?" Granger interrupted excitedly. "Wasn't the First Wizarding War involved with all these blood disputes? Like the Muggle American Civil War. I wonder if Professor Binns would accept an essay on the topic for extra credit-"

"It's not academic, Granger," Draco snarled, hearing desperation creep into his voice, and was glad the library was mainly deserted. "It's not over. People would hate you for it. My *father* would. He would never accept me hanging around a Muggleborn."

Granger's brow furrowed. "Do you believe all this about purity of blood? You don't seem to, Draco."

Of course he did. He had cheered with Vince and Greg when the Heir of Slytherin had started cleansing this ghastly place of Mudbloods, Granger included. He had sneered at Dumbledore and his reputation as a great wizard, because his Father had told him Dumbledore was a crock who risked the integrity of Hogwarts by letting in all of these unworthy Mudbloods. Mudbloods like Moaning Myrtle, who had deserved what she'd gotten. If he had spent a stretch of sixth year visiting her as the only person on the entire planet he could confide in, well, that was a mark of his own patheticness, nothing special about her. There was nothing special about Granger either, only a crude raw power of memory and mawkish vociferousness at devouring information about magic, to become an encyclopedic freak without ever understanding or deserving what was rightly only a pureblood legacy-

Father said that. Father had been the one to speak so much of what Draco knew about Mudbloods in his head. But Severus might have been in love with Lily Potter, who had once been Lily Evans. Mother had said that, once all the fighting and dying was over. And Severus had done what he did against the Dark Lord, reading between the lines, because of that unreturned love.

Draco didn't *not* believe in the importance of blood purity. He just wasn't so sure anymore.

"I don't know," Draco said softly, after too long standing there trying to decide. Maybe this was why the Sorting Hat had taken so long on him. It would have been better to declare himself firmly one way or another, but his weak answer put a calculating intelligence in Granger's eyes regardless, and she pulled him back to his table by the wrist that had once worn the Dark Mark.

"That all may be true," she whispered, "But it doesn't matter for this, Draco. It's just sitting together. Just studying. There can't be any harm in *studying*."

Accio Snitch

First flying lesson: Longbottom gets Remembrall from Grandmother's owl. Injures self in flying lesson falling off broom, Hooch takes to infirmary. I take the Remembrall in the air to taunt Potter. Potter follows me and I throw the Remembrall. He catches it right before it hits the ground like a Snitch. McGonagall sees and acts like she's mad but she secretly makes him Gryffindor Seeker. I am very jealous.

"You've been staring at that blank page for the past half hour, practically," Granger commented unhelpfully. "Almost longer than your Sorting." That earned her a baleful glare from Draco, finally forced to look up from his notebook by her annoyingness. "Oh, is that a sore spot? I thought it rather interesting that the hat took so long. Apparently it's called a *hat stall*-"

Did this girl ever shut up? "You're being rude," he whispered, "And you've only got half your inches done for Potions. What is going on with you, Granger?"

Granger tried to put on a brave face for a moment, and then her funny little squirrel face crumpled, and she produced *Quidditch Through the Ages* from her book pile with a despairing sigh. "Oh, I can't stand it any longer! These flying lessons tomorrow- I just don't know how I'm going to survive them! And no one will give me a straight answer on how we're given *marks* for them!"

Draco, as it happened, had no idea how he would survive the lesson tomorrow either. But somehow he didn't think Granger's issue would be trying to puzzle out whether there was any way to avoid having to duplicate the past and make an idiot of oneself throwing around a child's toy, while still somehow not wrecking the timeline for Gryffindor's youngest Seeker in a century. "No marks, none at all, believe it or not," Draco said absently from experience, only to turn and see how abject the panic had gone on her face. It was a bit insulting, really, that a child this afraid of a damn broomstick had never seemed afraid of his old self at all. "And reading about Quidditch won't help. It's only actual experience that does anything."

Granger leaned in to whisper as she eyed him curiously. "Have you ever been on a broom before, Draco?"

Draco snorted. "Of course I have," he boasted without thinking, "I'm the best of all the purebloods in my year," only to earn himself a withering glare rather than the impressed look he'd been hoping for. Compared to Vince and Greg, Granger proved a tough crowd. Not that he had any interest in befriending her, or even spending much time around her like with Vince and Greg. Sooner or later she would start spending more of her time with Potter and Weasel, and would forget all about the Slytherin she had used to study with when she first got to Hogwarts.

"Oh, well, it's all fine and good for you, then," she hissed, voice going higher-pitched and threatening to disturb the library. "You grew up with magic, so you can just sit there staring at the same page for half an hour without a care in the world because you know *you* aren't going

to fall from your broom and crack your skull open-" She realized her voice was rising and lowered it. "And really, from everything I've read about other methods of Wizarding transportation, brooms are an unnecessarily arcane means of transport for the modern wizard. Not to mention that the scoring system of Quidditch is insanely unbalanced-"

"Granger," Draco sighed, reaching over and closing her copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* for her. "You aren't going to die. I promise. If you look like you're going to fall, I'll fly below you and catch you, alright? I'm not lying when I say I'm quite good at flying."

A prickling feeling at the back of his neck made him whirl around to see that yes, despite their lowered voices, someone was listening in on them. Someone who made him speechless at first to see standing less than a meter away, holding a book from the shelf that he wasn't reading. The sight made Draco regret not having just told Severus the truth the moment he could. "Hello, Potter," Draco drawled. "Interesting book, is it?"

Potter's face went the most fascinating shade of Gryffindor red. "I'm sorry, I just- I didn't mean to eavesdrop, I'm just excited about flying lessons tomorrow, too," he mumbled, and dropped his book and positively fled the library. Granger watched him go rather analytically.

"For someone so famous, he's rather bashful and humble, isn't he?" she mused.

Draco snorted. "Should I be looking up mistletoe charms for you this Yuletide?"

She didn't flush half as much as Potter had, even once she understood, rolling her eyes and swatting at him with *Quidditch Through the Ages.* "Hardly. I just mean he's rather ordinary."

"Ordinary," Draco said with a smirk, and picked up the book. "*Winograd's Wondrous Water Plants.* If the Chosen One is going to try and act like he wants a book and not just to spy on his intellectual superiors, he might want to choose more convincing reading material for the subterfuge."

The last thing he should have been doing was making fun of Potter to Granger, putting any potential wedges in to hinder the friendship that Potter needed to drag him over the line. But the way Granger had to cover her mouth mightily with both hands to stopper her laughter, and still shook the table from laughing enough that Madam Pince threatened to kick them out, made it hard to regret the joke. Even if it felt like corrupting her.

What he regretted was coming to Broom Flight class the next day without a clear plan of attack. The Severus in his head told him, *I would have had one, I would have known exactly what to do, and would have instructed you, if you had not been fool enough not to tell me yet.* He ignored his inner Severus, telling himself his back wasn't fully healed yet, but felt an anxiety grow in his own stomach as potent in its own way as Neville Longbottom's palpable terror.

It had seemed innocuous in his reckoning at first, whether Potter began playing Quidditch in his first or second year. But flying on a broom was how he'd taken on the Hungarian Horntail, in the First Task in fourth year. A year worth of experience more on a broom could mean the difference between narrow escape and microwaved Potter. Checkmate, Dark Lord victorious thanks to two meddling dragons. Not to mention the way a Seeker's enhanced reflexes could

add a split second faster reaction time in a duel. No, whatever he did, he had to get Potter scouted by McGonagall during this first lesson. Any later and he couldn't guarantee she and Oliver Wood would want to or have the time to change the Gryffindor line-up after that. It had to be today.

The sun was shining too brilliantly and the sky was too blue on that brisk September day for what could be the precipitous end to the chances of the forces of light. He had a distinct mortifying memory of Hooch correcting his grip the first time, but after his years as Slytherin seeker, this time she had nothing of his to correct. Otherwise, the memory unfolded as if he was outside himself watching in a Pensieve. There was the crisp hit of the school broomstick against his palm when told *Up*, with Potter's responding already a second sooner, and then Longbottom pushing off by himself for no good reason and rocketing up comically high. Draco was still having trouble connecting this Longbottom with the slayer of giant snakes. If he was a different person, he might have felt bad watching Longbottom crash back to the ground spectacularly and break his wrist, knowing he had foreknowledge to prevent it. But he had only saved Longbottom from that first accident in Potions as an experiment, and perhaps a grudging thank you for the snake-slaying. And because he did grow up to be really fit.

There was nothing fit about Neville as he hobbled away, only for some of the Slytherins to burst into laughter. Without Draco as ringleader, the mockery was less directed and vicious than he remembered. Draco took the chance to slink over to Greg and breathe in his ear, "Look on the grass, that's Longbottom's Remembrall. Would sure be a shame if someone were to grab it and fly it away, wouldn't it?"

"What's a Remembrall?" Greg asked blankly.

Their gazes attracted the attention of Pansy, who seemed to watch Draco no less often than she had the first time around. He'd thought her attracted by his witty repartee and social dominance, but actually, it seemed he could sneak around and barely talk to anyone and have her look at him the same, which was disheartening. Made it seem like it was just the Malfoy name to have impressed her all along. He felt even less charitable towards her when she bent and picked up the Remembrall, turning it over. "What's this? A crystal ball? What would that fat little crybaby need this for?"

"Give it here," Weasley said fiercely, and with a lunge had plucked it from Pansy's arms and pulled it protectively against his chest.

If influencing another Slytherin fell through, Draco's only back-up plan had been to take the bullet, act the bully, and do it himself. That was no longer an option either.

"How long do you think we'll have to wait before Madam Hooch is back?" Granger asked no one in particular. "I had a question about the type of wood of this broom-"

"Hey, eavesdropper," Draco said loudly, getting right in that cute little owl face of Potter's with the best impression of swagger he could muster. "Said you were looking forward to flying lessons, were you? Looks like now's your chance. Why don't you give it a go?"

Both Potter and their entire class looked at him like he'd grown a second head. An unfortunate side effect of having spent the past week and half only talking at any serious

length to Severus, and, he thought with an uncomfortable realization, with Granger. Potter as he'd used to know him would be expecting the worst from Draco Malfoy, raring at the bit to meet him head-on at whatever challenge he threw in his face. But this Potter had none of that history with him- Draco was nobody to him.

But it was the need to get Potter made Seeker ex post facto, and not any ludicrous need for Potter's attention that made him take his next measure.

"Your father," Draco said, and that got Potter's attention right to him. "Your father was a famous Seeker for Gryffindor at Hogwarts, did you know that? Think you inherited any of his skill?"

"Draco," Granger said, "You had better not be thinking of doing any flying without Madam Hooch's supervision. She quite clearly said-"

Draco drew his wand. "Accio Snitch," he said, focusing distinctly on the cupboard where he knew the practice snitches were kept in the broomshed, and only had to suffer his classmates' baffled stares for a second before there was a streak of gold hurtling towards his hand. Brown shrieked and ducked as it whizzed past her with a satisfying smack into his palm. "What do you say, Potter? Want to see how good you are?"

"Draco Malfoy," Granger said, inserting herself between them, "Harry Potter, don't you for one second think either of you are going to-"

Draco tilted his head to smirk at Potter around Granger. "You know how it works, don't you, Potter? The Seeker catches this golden ball. The Snitch. I let it go, and we both try to catch it. Two on two. Seeker on Seeker. Easy, isn't it?"

"Draco," Potter said slowly, "Why do you want to-"

"When else are we going to get the chance to play this year?" Draco lied impatiently, and tossed the snitch from hand to hand while Granger radiated steam from her head. "I miss flying. And if I'm going to play, I want to play the best. As James Potter's son, you qualify. Or at least you should." Draco tried the words that had often seemed to get Potter's goat. "Scared, *Potter*?"

There was a giddy feeling of rightness at watching the stubborn light settle once more in those eyes, face setting with determination as Potter spat out like Draco hoped, "You wish."

A kick off the ground and he was in the air again, and Merlin, he had missed the feeling of flying more than he had known. He couldn't clearly remember the last time he had been on a broom- could it have been in the Room of Requirement when Potter saved him? He couldn't think of any time since. Azkaban had a rather poor extracurricular program. "Come on, Potter," Draco called, hearing the exhilaration steal into his voice, and laughed at the sheer lightness he felt from the sunlight on his face. He laughed again at the sight of Potter kicking off and joining him.

Granger was still calling furiously up at them, trying to stop them before Madam Hooch got back and yelling something about House points, but the rest of their class just seemed

excited, with Weasley calling out tips and encouragements. He could hear Slytherins placing bets. Their faith in his skill was inconvenient, since he had no intention of winning. "Okay," Draco said, brandishing the Snitch in the sunlight for Potter again. "You catch it. No other rules. Go!" And he let it fly.

Potter looked for a moment like he couldn't believe what he was doing, but when Draco zoomed off to follow the glint of gold, he heard the rush of wind of Potter close on his tail. Just as much a natural as he should be. Ideally, Draco would have charmed the Snitch to ensure it flew by McGonagall's window at some point, not that he knew any such charm for Snitches' movements or he would not have lost to Potter quite so many times, but this improvisation would have to do.

And it got him, impossibly enough, a feeling he had never thought would return, with the childish days of petty rivalries and Quidditch obsession lost forever: slicing through the air with Potter a blur of red beside him, chasing the Snitch together.

There were distant gasps as Draco flew a sharp loop around a tower to keep on the Snitch's trail, easier when he'd had his eye on it since unleashing it, and louder ones when Potter stayed in the race by doing exactly what Draco had done, faster. Draco's heart was pounding in his ears, dormant instincts rushing back into his body, whether the atrophied ones from years as Slytherin Seeker or this body's muscle memory from pick-up games in Theo's garden, he couldn't have said, but there was that training in him from somewhere that locked him onto the gold. And of course Potter, being the loathsomely perfect individual he had always been, without a day of practice in this timeframe, was still just that one bit better than him. That didn't matter in the moment either, though. There wasn't the old bitterness at Potter showing him up, which had never seemed to completely leave him even in Potter's absence, just the adrenaline rush of height and careening down, Potter scraping the grass in pursuit of him again before the Snitch flitted up higher, at last, yes, towards McGonagall's tower...

Draco threw the match, of course, but he didn't think he could have beaten Potter even if he stayed in that swooping dive until the end. He pulled out too quickly, though, to ever know.

And this was Potter's genius at Quidditch, that he even made Draco think their savior was about to crash into the ground and gain himself a whole lot of less heroic facial scars, but Potter stopped just a foot from the ground, as brilliant a streak of crimson in the heavy sun as a phoenix in flight, and came to a stop on the grass with his feet on the ground and the Snitch in his hand.

"HARRY POTTER! Never- in all my time at Hogwarts-"

There she was, Professor McGonagall, running towards them looking as furious as he had hoped he would, a fury probably less complete once she saw Potter and a gracefully landing Draco were both unharmed. He knew McGonagall's show of rage now as what must be a partial falsehood, the conniving old bird, to throw anyone off the scent that might already think she had found her House's new Seeker. Severus had used to complain of her fanatical competitiveness with him when it came to the sport. "How dare you- might have broken your neck-"

"It wasn't his fault, Professor-"

"Be quiet, Miss Patil-"

"But Malfoy-"

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley. Rest assured, Mr. Malfoy will be accompanying me as well. Leave your brooms, gentlemen, and follow me, now."

Draco stole a glance at Potter on their march back to the castle, and was surprised to find him looking petrified with fear. Where was that famous Gryffindor courage? Let him be pleasantly surprised, then, by the unexpected result to come of his transgression. Draco wouldn't be the one to let him off the hook. This play of Draco's should also have the desirable result of putting himself firmly back into Potter's disliked category where he belonged. Best not to spoil it.

"And you," McGonagall said witheringly, "Your Head of House has also been alerted of your behavior, and summoned to deal with *you*."

Somehow, Draco didn't think Severus would believe him if he told him he'd challenged Harry Potter to a Quidditch game to save the world.

The Midnight Duel

Draco was quite satisfied with the day's results, particularly when his own misdemeanors only netted him the punishment of three Saturday night detentions with Severus, brewing basic potions for the Hogwarts stores. That really just meant success in his efforts to spend more time with Severus, and maybe additional practice on something interesting if he played his cards right.

"That's not fair," Granger said when she heard, quivering with indignation. "You break the rules and all you get is Potions practice? That's a reward, not a punishment! And we've only just gotten to Hogwarts. Why would Professor Snape trust a first-year to refill his own stores?"

Draco shrugged lackadaisically, too proud of himself and his incredible strategic thinking to feel much shame. "Well, Professor Snape knows I'm already a skilled potions master, you know?" He was drawing stares where he was standing, summoned to the Gryffindor table at dinner by an apoplectic Granger, but Granger ought to get the chance to be impressed by him as well. He shouldn't be gloating, but it was rare any of his plans ever came off this well.

And she happened to be the only person he had to gloat to.

"Right, you're such an expert. Because you've years of practice growing up as a wizard," Granger finished, looking if anything angrier with him. "But just because you're from an old family and you want to be an Unspeakable doesn't mean you already know *everything*. Draco, you and Harry could have been expelled!"

"Oh, no, I haven't been *that* foolish. My father is one of the school governors, as it happens," Draco drawled, amused by Granger's mounting fury. It was cute, in the sort of way the albino peacocks at the Manor could be, waving their wings about when they got one of their feet trapped in a sinkhole. "So I highly doubt *I* would have been expelled."

"Harry could have been, though," Granger persisted, and Draco snorted, having known far more securely of Potter's safety from expulsion than his own, going off the first time round.

"Ah. Yes, perhaps," Draco said nonchalantly, playing it off with a flippant shrug.

"Was that your plan?" a very unwelcome ginger-owned voice demanded, and Draco turned to find Potter and Weasley listening in, looking no happier than Granger, since, after all, this did happen to be the Gryffindor table. When he'd first come over, the two had been engrossed in excited conversation with the Weasley twins, probably spreading the news of Potter's recruitment, but the twins had left and all their attention was on Draco now. "Is that why you challenged Harry? To try and get him expelled? Because you knew your *father* would protect you, Malfoy?"

It had never been that bizarre-sounding *Draco* from Weasley's lips as it had been from Potter and Granger's, only *Malfoy*. There was a comfort in that. "You're paranoid, Weasley. I have better things to do than entertain the delusions of a gaggle of Gryffindor children."

Draco gave Granger a curt wave goodbye before striding out of the Great Hall, only to hear Weasley hot on his trail into the courtyard, with a warier but similarly irritated-looking Potter right behind him, and Granger further back in pursuit. *Gryffindors*. "What now?" he sighed, turning on his heel to face the trio. Strange to think how young they had first looked to him, just as his own reflection had in the Manor. But with every passing day, his perspective seemed to shrink to his height. It had started to be the adults around them and even the upper years who looked massively tall and old, and themselves the ordinary ones. As long as the other parts of his mind didn't also start returning to being 11, it would have been convenient.

"What is wrong with you?" Weasley asked furiously, "You really don't care that you could have gotten Harry kicked out," only for Potter to snap at the same time,

"What do you have against me, Malfoy?"

Oh. Malfoy. That was new. And, of course, not.

"Is it that I saw you crying at Ollivander's?"

Any trace of a smile left Draco's face. "Hardly, Potter. Now go away, you're being boring."

"I thought we could be friends at first," Potter said, green eyes brimming over with offended sincerity. "But Ron was right about you, wasn't he? You said it yourself, Malfoy. I should have listened." Draco had said Weasley was right about his *father*, if he recalled correctly, but he wasn't going to engage in any more of this petty quarrel with schoolchildren.

"Oh, come off it," Draco sneered, drawing himself up and setting his grey eyes as dismissive and ice-cold as they could go. "Bluster all you like, it doesn't make a difference. I don't care." He enunciated the last sentence with the frosty emphasis on each independent word that Severus would have used. A memory of the last time around made him smile, thinking how much worse he could make this for the Gryffindors, if he was truly to adhere strictly to repeating the past, but he was above such puerile tricks. He wouldn't send Potter out for a duel and stand him up again. "Try and act all tough for your little friends, Potter, you're not actually going to do anything about it. What, is the mighty Chosen One going to hit me? Challenge me to a duel? Yeah, I didn't think so. So if you'll excuse me, the library-"

"I do," Potter blurted, "Challenge you. To a duel," and when Draco turned to be sure it was a joke like he had thought, his face was embarrassed but determined.

You have got to be kidding me.

Maybe Draco shouldn't have been so smug about the flying lesson. Maybe the past was just harder to avoid than he had thought. Especially if you joked about what you remembered happening, and expected a brainless Gryffindor not to take it as an invitation.

"You, Potter?" Draco said with a scoff, trying to hide how stricken he was. "You don't even know what a wizard's duel is." He had wanted to stay unnoticed until he could get home, but it seemed he was on his way to earning Potter's old hatred back. "So really, if you're finished-
"

"Of course he knows what it is," Weasley interrupted, stepping up resolutely. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

"This is ridiculous," Draco muttered, and Potter and Weasley's faces went triumphant, as if they had just called a bluff he hadn't meant to make.

"What," went Potter, then said in a passable imitation of Draco, "Scared, Malfoy?"

Draco had meant to say no. He had meant to laugh it off, and let them think him as cowardly as they liked. But he found himself rounding on Potter instead, and the face he must have had then set Granger darting forward and trying to insert herself again between them. She had seemed unafraid he would take the challenge at first, but she must have caught the change in the air. "Draco, don't, it's not worth it, think of your *studies*-"

"Fine," Draco heard himself say. "Midnight. I'll meet you in the trophy room, that's always unlocked." And then he whirled around and stalked off, pleased to feel his robes billowing behind him in a way a bit like Severus's tended to. Not that he'd been practicing. Much.

"Draco Malfoy, have you lost your mind? You're going to be an Unspeakable!" he heard Granger yelling after him, but he didn't stop walking with a furious spite growing in his chest until he had reached the dungeons. He slumped on his bed, casting his usual Muffliato and Spelunca Secure, only to undo the second right away to get his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions*, and then lunge for the chest underneath his bed. There at the very bottom was Imoogi the dragon, who hadn't even come with him the first time around, but had somehow ended up packed on the second go. He took the dragon with him, throwing the textbook on the sheets, and recast Spelunca Secure before he hugged Imoogi to his chest and fell forward, burying his face in the pillows.

He wouldn't go. If he was trying to replicate the past, if it was all inevitable no matter what he did, then he should just not show up like the last time. So what if Potter and Weasley thought he was setting them up to get them in trouble. It wasn't even his idea.

But that it was *Potter* challenging- if he didn't show up this way around, they would just think he was being a coward. His mind kept replaying the way Potter's face had looked as he called out, *Scared, Malfoy*? Draco rolled onto his side and stared at Imoogi's familiar plush face, playing with the baby dragon tooth that hung around her neck. He wished she wasn't part-green, though, because Potter's stupid eyes were making him think of everything green in connection to them, not even of Slytherin colors at the moment. His Slytherin tie, his bedsheets, even his own bloody stuffed toy, all of them just kept Potter's eyes in his mind. He tried to look at his Potions textbook and muster up the motivation to start his essay for next week, but the first-year stuff was so mind-numbingly dull to him now. And everything in the world was dull in comparison to Harry Potter.

He got a book on Occlumency he had checked out from the library, lying back down and casting a dictation charm on Imoogi that he had learned in that month of purgatory at the Manor. The sound emitting from her stuffed body made it like she was reading it to him, and in retrospect, he might be in the process of growing at least slightly unhinged. But he did know it wasn't actually his dragon talking to him.

Although he would have preferred it if it was. Imoogi was much better company than anyone else at Hogwarts.

Far better than the other Slytherin first-years, who Draco found himself watching from a safe distance in the common room, a place he usually avoided like the plague. He had to, once his resolution to ignore the duel had broken, and he'd been seized with the insane urge to find himself a second for the duel. He wasn't going to go, but he should figure one out anyway. Just in case.

Vince and Greg were currently tearing through one of Mother's care packages, all of which so far Draco had summarily turned over to the other first-year boys in a bribe to leave him alone to study. They were doing so opposite Blaise, who was attempting to instruct them in the basest of basics they'd learned in Astronomy just last night, while Theo worked on what looked to be his potions essay with Pansy and Millie, all three intent at their work.

He couldn't be sure any of them would say yes if he asked them, and far less sure that even if they said yes that they would actually show up. It turned out there were disadvantages to forcibly severing all of his old social ties as quickly and fiercely as he had. Perhaps Vince or Greg would do as he said out of old habit, though they might be persuaded otherwise in the interval between now and midnight, but even if they would-

He was probably projecting to think they looked so much happier sitting with Blaise than they ever had with him. He'd never had much luck drilling anything academic into those thick heads, but from how Vince managed to recite the list of constellations Blaise had patiently given him, maybe Draco had just been an awful teacher. Should he drag one of them through the halls of Hogwarts once again, to back him up to face off with Potter, and force him to the position of unthinking lackey again? Yes, he probably could, but the last time he had led Vince like that-

It was hard to imagine what his Hogwarts years would have looked like without Vince and Greg at his side, something between bodyguards, unpaid servants, and audience, knowing all the while their attendance was not quite friendship. Perhaps with each other, but with Draco, it had been more servile, and they'd all known those two followed his father's last name around more than they followed Draco, and known they all knew it. There had been no warmth there. He'd treated them like mindless enchanted golems, up until the point that he'd found out too late that even golems could burn, and a master did not need to be worthy for you to die for him-

Draco pulled himself away from the common room, retreating to his bed as quickly as he could, trying to ignore the smell in his nose like the Room of Requirement burning. Better they follow someone else, and in one fell swoop keep Vince alive to grow to a ripe old age of idiot. Because Vince wasn't anyone important in the scheme of things. He could have lived or died in that room and it wouldn't have made any difference to the outcome of the war, and if the past was changeable, this was the simplest thing in the world to alter. Let Vince live by keeping him away from the boy who had led him to his death.

His realization that if he did go to the duel, it would have to be alone was enough to reinforce his determination not to show up. But then he found himself lying in bed past eleven, not noticing he was on his back, with the scars truthfully all but healed already from Severus's

expertise. He was failing to sleep without pain as an excuse. Hugging Imoogi to his chest under the covers like he had as a child did not even make him sleepy. All he could think of was Potter's voice going, *Scared, Malfoy*, and that look in his death-colored eyes.

When Draco made it to the trophy room around quarter till midnight, he found the dark room already positively plagued with Gryffindors in pajamas and dressing gowns. He felt overdressed in the Slytherin uniform he'd put back on, and most definitely outnumbered. Although it was like that old joke, *How many Gryffindors does it take to cast a Lumos*? Apparently more than four.

"Lumos," Draco said with a sigh, and watched the glimmer of the trophies and statues come to life around the startled faces of not just Potter and Weasley but Granger and *Longbottom* of all people. "Did I get turned around and end up in the Gryffindor common room? I'll have to brush up on my disinfecting charms."

Only Granger caught his meaning. "We're not here to gang up on you," she said primly. "Neville forgot the password to the common room, and I've come to put a stop to this foolishness."

Potter frowned. "You mean you were trying to talk us out of it, and accidentally got locked out of the common room too." That made Weasley guffaw, and Granger serve both of them with a death glare before turning to Draco with an even darker look.

"I would have thought *you'd* have had more sense than to go through with this, at least," she said airily. "When is your second arriving?"

"Oh, he's already here," Draco said, dead-pan. "The secret's out, Longbottom, let's show them how it's done."

The squeak that Longbottom let out then could only be described as inhuman. And no one laughed at Draco's joke.

"I'm obviously kidding. I don't have one," he admitted, only to fear a return of that intolerable pity from Potter he had come to know so well. That made him add, "I won't need one to deal with *children.*"

"You're so arrogant," Potter marveled, and then squared his shoulders and stepped forward. "I'm going to show you, Malfoy."

"What are you going to show me, then?" Draco drawled, finding that as always, Potter was beginning to bring out the worst in him. "Your proclivity for eavesdropping? Your alarming inability to complete a coherent sentence? Except no, you're standing awful *close* now. If you were so desperate to meet me in secret in the middle of the night, Potter, you didn't have to make up all this nonsense about *duels.* Just ask me to the Astronomy Tower and-"

"Shut up, Malfoy," spat Potter, looking as embarrassed as Draco had ever seen him, and looked over to Ron. "How does this start?"

"This is not going to *start* at all," Granger interrupted, "Because this is *ridiculous*. Don't you think so, Neville?" An awkward-looking Longbottom at her side looked hardly thrilled to be brought to notice, and remained nervously silent.

"You get your wands out," Weasley instructed, as if he was a veteran of these things, and the memory of Lockhart's Dueling Club in second year hit Draco with a surreal partial déjà vu, hearing Weasley's quavering voice substituting out Severus's over a year too early. But Potter followed Weasley's instructions, so Draco had no choice but to get out his own wand.

Draco shouldn't have been nervous, as he turned and took the mandated paces backwards rather mechanically, but his heart felt ready to burst in his chest. He should have been confident in his ability to beat any first-year with how much experience he had in comparison, all four of these Gryffindor children if need be, and Potter likely hadn't learned most any spells for duels, definitely not his trademark Expelliarmus. But the wand in his hand was one whose last offensive spell had been Sectumsempra, and left his family's flowerbeds coated in blood. He hadn't learned to fully control it yet, either. He shouldn't have left off practicing with it once he got to Hogwarts, and the surge of readied magic that seemed to come to it at the thought of a duel was so sharp it was almost like the neglect had made it angry. Its raw power made him hesitate at the thought of casting anything remotely dangerous at their pretty little savior. Severus had said that this bent wand didn't have Aunt Bella's personality, but that it *could* have a character of its own-

And yes, maybe there was some small part of him that feared, even if he fought with everything he had, that no matter what advantage in memories he had, he still couldn't beat Harry Potter. Because he never had, not at anything. There was something that told him no matter what he did, Potter would always win.

Weasley did not seem to have as much belief in his best friend as Draco did, to judge by the face he made once Draco and Potter turned to face one another. Draco fell into a dueling stance with his wand raised, and Potter just sort of stood there before trying to copy Draco. "Three... two... one..." Weasley counted with dread in his voice, like he was about to watch the Chosen One get bodied, and this time, Draco made sure to wait for the countdown to elapse before casting. That meant, of course, that Potter's superior reflexes had him getting off the first spell before Draco did.

But Draco didn't even have speak a word to block it, just raise his wand for a wordless shield with utter disbelief. The destined defeater of Lord Voldemort in single combat began his first ever Wizarding duel with Spongify? What did Potter plan to do, punish the evil Malfoy's dastardly ways by making his Slytherin robes a little too pleasantly soft? It occurred to Draco that with so little time at Hogwarts, Potter might know few if any other spells he could possibly use in a duel, but he could have read ahead like Granger had. And either way- *Spongify*?

Luckily for Draco, *he* didn't happen to be a first-year just starting the Hogwarts curriculum. And the spell he'd decided on wasn't on any year's curriculum. Severus had taught it to him, though he couldn't remember exactly when, a curse of Severus's own invention that should bring this farce to a quick end. "Langlock!" Draco shouted, and watched the light from his

wand hit Potter and do just as advertised, from the way Potter flew back, crashing to the ground, and arose with his lips moving but no sound coming out.

"What did you do to him?" Granger shouted furiously, as Potter touched at his throat and then teeth with panic in his eyes.

"Langlock. It's just glued his tongue to the roof of his mouth so he can't cast any spells." Draco sighed, a part of him let down at the ease of victory. He turned towards their audience, pocketing his wand. "And that is the end of the duel for him. He'll have to yield, unless you'd like to see me cast whatever I like on a defenseless Potter." He let himself smirk at Weasley. "And no, no second needed. Really, Weasley, it's as if you were setting him up to fail. You'd think a pureblood wizard could have taught his friend something to cast better than-"

And then Draco was on the ground, back hitting hard enough that he was later forced to conclude the wounds there were fully healed, to give so little reaction. The only pain came from his cheek, where Potter's fist had struck and sent him falling over. He had little time after realizing what had happened before Potter had hit him again, uncoordinated hands landing on Draco's neck instead as he fell onto Draco and started to try and fight him with fists like a savage Muggle.

"Harry, what are you doing, this is a *wizard's* duel," Granger was shouting plaintively, but Potter had the upper hand and he knew it, straddling Draco and pinning Draco's arm under his knee when Draco reached reflexively for the wand in his pocket. Draco tried to buck up under Potter and roll him off him, but Potter was somehow stronger than him, or at least better with his fists, and that heavier Gryffindor dressing gown made it hard to land any blows on his body. He only managed to struggle and grapple a little with the body over his before Potter got him pinned again, sprawled out with his weight keeping him down.

"Get off me, Potter, you cheat!" Draco spat, trying to squirm out from under him. Potter didn't dispute the cheat remark, just pinned Draco's arms securely back under his knees again. Either Weasley really hadn't explained duels properly to Potter, or Potter just felt justified in this case. Always content to bend the rules for himself, that was Potter- who had his tongue spelled silent, so that did explain the lack of retort.

And then Potter's wand held at his throat was retort enough.

Yield, he could see in Potter's eyes, the command clearer still once his free hand knotted in Draco's Slytherin tie and yanked it, pulling him up so his neck was pushed against Potter's jabbing wand.

"Yield," Draco whispered, but not loud enough. "I yield!" he called, making sure the others would hear, but it took Potter longer than it should have to get back off him, frozen there for a long moment of agony. Then he was eventually helped up by Weasley, pushing his glasses back up his nose and straightening his dressing gown.

"Oh, Harry, how could you?" Granger said at once, tugging at Potter's sleeve plaintively, and Draco began to pick himself up in turn.

"The duel is over, Harry won," Weasley said to Draco, sounding almost as breathless as Draco and Potter, "So fix him," and it was the strangest feeling to watch Granger turn furiously on Weasley in Draco's defense.

"He didn't win! He broke the rules, there's no physical fighting, or Draco would have won," she insisted, and she and Weasley began to argue, while Draco was faced with an expectant Potter.

"What?" Draco hissed, wondering if Potter expected some kind of apology as well, some admission he was indeed the greatest at all things. He fixed his Slytherin tie with only a few tries, smoothing down his robes with the ostentatious propriety of a civilized being outraged by an animal, only for Potter to wince and point to his face.

And it took Draco a few more vacant seconds staring at Potter than it should, before he remembered the curse he'd cast. "Right!" he said hurriedly, "Finite Incantatem," and Potter let out a sigh of relief, reaching into his mouth and pulling his tongue between his fingers, feeling at it like he could hardly believe Draco had fixed it and not just cursed him again.

"Well, I'll be going, then. Congratulations, Potter." Draco beat a hasty retreat towards the door. Granger called after him, but he tore out of the trophy room like a bat out of hell. He could barely breathe by the time he stopped running, come to a halt in some faceless corridor, only to duck behind a corner when he heard Filch's voice narrating to his cat, going past talking about the sounds of fighting nearby, students out of bed to catch.

Maybe Draco should go back and warn them-

Like hell.

He went right back to the Slytherin dungeons and didn't even feel a little sorry.

The Neglected Birthday

Granger stopped speaking to Potter and Weasley after the wizard's duel, declaring them both shameless cheats. She said Potter had shamefacedly admitted to his fellow Gryffindors that he hadn't understood fist-fighting wasn't allowed. Apparently, though, Weasley had argued that Potter had the right to defend himself any way he needed, because the rules had gone out the window with Draco's use of dark magic. A proper duel didn't include fists, but it didn't have *dark magic curses* either. Fair point, but it wasn't like any of the Gryffindors knew what Langlock was enough to prove it.

Draco should have disabused Granger of her sputtering indignation, admitted that Weasley was right that it had been dark magic he used. He had been the one to abandon so-called fair play first, when he hadn't even needed to against a first-year. Or he could have told her he'd happily abandoned her as well as the Gryffindor boys to being caught by Filch, when he could have warned them. But his tongue wouldn't work any better than Potter's had in the duel, much as he knew he should be driving her back towards them. It felt too good to have someone on his side.

And Potter sent him a note a few days after Granger's mediation, offering a truly extraordinary apology. Draco had to keep it in one of his notebooks and pull out each time he thought of it, to prove to himself it was real:

Dear Draco,

I'm sorry I cheated in our duel. I really didn't understand the rules, but it's no excuse. I shouldn't have challenged you to a duel in the first place. I thought you had been trying to get me expelled during flying lessons. But that's no excuse either. I know I keep making excuses, but I want you to understand.

I shouldn't have said about Ollivander's to Ron and Hermione. After we met at Ollivander's, I had hoped we could be friends at Hogwarts. But I understand if you wouldn't want that now.

By the way, Ron says sorry too, if you weren't really trying to get me expelled.

If you weren't, and you just wanted to play Quidditch with me, I'm extra sorry.

I would really like for us to play Quidditch together again sometime if you wanted. You're really good at it.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Draco was going to keep that repentant little letter till the day he died.

When she showed Granger the boys' peace offering, she still harrumphed, but looked more mollified. On her part, she told him some ridiculous story about the three of them fleeing from Filch and finding some three-headed dog, which Draco wouldn't have believed if it wasn't Potter and friends. After a week had passed since the duel, though, she had gone quiet and resentful after her Gryffindor classes again, even with them working in the library on an essay for Transfiguration, one of her favorite subjects. "It's just that it happens to be my birthday," she whispered, failing to keep a hurt note out of her voice, "And no one, not even my parents, seems to have noticed."

Draco frowned. "Aren't your parents Muggles? Would they even know how to send owls?"

"Oh, they don't, and I told them not to try, just- it doesn't matter," Hermione hissed, looking as if it mattered a great deal, and when she slammed *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration* shut with excessive force and began to shove books into her bag, Draco followed his instinct to do the same and walk out with her, curiosity spurring him on. "I'm going back to Gryffindor Tower."

It was as good as a dismissal, and yet Draco followed. "What, are you mad none of your friends got you anything? I know the Weasel is poor, but Potter's got loads of Galleons-"

"Ron? Harry?" she breathed, stopping to look at him as if he'd been Confunded. "Those two cheaters? Our *intellectual inferiors?*" Merlin, Draco really needed to stop using that phrase in front of her. "Why would they buy me a birthday present?" From the sound of it, then, no one had. "And I don't need any, it's not a big deal, so I turned 12, so what-"

12, not 11. Pretty ahead in age for her year, then. That explained some of the precociousness, and why he found her a bit less mind-numbingly childish to talk to than the first-year Slytherins. Draco wished he had known that all those times Father berated him for performing worse than her. Not that Father would have accepted it as an excuse.

Granger was going on, working herself up into a lather against herself. "And really, it's silly. We're here to study, not to have *parties*, and the day one is born is hardly any great accomplishment- really, it's an arbitrary choice of celebration-" Her lower lip began to quiver quite mightily. "It's just, no one's even told me happy birthday."

Sweet Salazar. Was *this* the greatest witch of their generation?

Still, as Granger started up her stomping towards Gryffindor and Draco was left standing in the corridor, he called out after her, "Happy birthday!"

She smiled at him weakly before she went.

He didn't think about it again until dinner that night, when a owl swooped in to drop a letter for him, an owl that he recognized with a sinking heart as unmistakably his father's dark tawny Claudius. No care package either, though the sight of Draco getting owls had trained Vince and Greg to look over excitedly before they realized there were no sweets to come for them. Instead, it was just the letter, written on his father's personal stationary with its Malfoy

crest and green and black borders, his handwriting sharp and more jagged than usual, as if written hurriedly in anger. Draco had expected a letter like this about his escapades in flying class, but a week late at dinner was unusual, and made him fear worse. And he had people staring after an owl come at the wrong meal, so he took it out of the Great Hall into the courtyard with long strides, sure that whatever it said, he would not want to read it in anyone else's sight.

Draco,

Your behavior surrounding your aunt's wand, along with the untrained and unsupervised practice of dark magic before your departure for Hogwarts, was utterly unacceptable for a Malfoy. Your behavior at Hogwarts has passed beyond unacceptable to shameful upon our name.

Word has already spread of the incredible length of your Sorting, but since you went to Slytherin in the end, this could be taken as one more brief aberration on your road to improvement. Since then, though, you have been late to classes, failed to participate adequately, and moreover, received a series of detentions for a Quidditch incident involving Harry Potter. Do any of these strike you as rumors befitting a Malfoy?

Moreover, and far more seriously, you have alienated yourself from your classmates, ignoring the pureblood children whom your mother painstakingly arranged for so long to be your friends and allies, and have instead taken up publicly befriending a Gryffindor Mudblood. For you to conduct yourself in a manner so opposite to everything your family taught you is beyond the point of shame, to the point one begins to fear the madness of the Black line threatening to contaminate your blood.

Your mother and I expect you to immediately reconcile with your Slytherin classmates, cease any unnecessary interaction with any individuals of questionable bloodline, and return this owl with a prompt and thorough explanation of your behavior.

Father hadn't even signed it, such had been the pique behind the words, but there had been no need. Draco stared at the missive, reread it, and did as he had done with so many other pieces of Malfoy stationery these past months: tossed it in the air and lit it on fire, the wand letting out the spell before he even had to say Incendio. He looked around after the impulsive deed was done, but no one had been around to notice. No one had followed him out of concern or even nosiness, as Vince and Greg would have once upon a time. Should he have expected someone to?

He had preferred Potter's correspondence.

He directed Claudius to wait in the Owlery for him to send it back out. Oh, he would write Father an answer. Tomorrow. Maybe, if he felt like it. Or the next day, whenever he had some spare time. But he had more important things to do at the moment than appeasing Voldemort's preeminent bootlicker. He had a Muggleborn to find a birthday present.

A cursory search of his possessions, though, uncovered nothing that immediately presented itself as suitable, either too small and ordinary or far too grand, not that he had any idea what to give a 12-year-old girl anyway. He spent a lot of time contemplating and dismissing various books, surely the natural thing to give a bookworm like Granger, before retreating back behind his bed curtains to give up for the moment, thinking he would have to send for something suitable, and there just wouldn't be any decent present possible on the day itself.

He pressed his face into Imoogi's long neck, rubbing his nose in for childish comfort, and tried to understand how exactly his life had come to the point where he was agonizing about what present to send off to buy for Hermione Granger. But he was not going to give his father the satisfaction of falling into line and doing just as he told him. Not again.

He moved his lower lip out of the way of Imoogi's necklace, feeling the baby dragon tooth dig into his skin like it always did. Really, he didn't know what Aunt Andromeda had been thinking, giving him a present with such a garish decoration-

A small toy's necklace, which made it about the circumference of the wrist of a 12-year-old girl, give or take a winding or two.

Draco kept a close eye on the time as he began hastily at the Transfiguration, thinking he could finish it before the hour got too late, but he was nowhere near the picture in his mind by the time all the other boys were in bed. He barricaded himself behind more charms than usual and stayed up sitting with Imoogi over the necklace turned bracelet and his first-year Transfiguration textbook, which proved absolutely useless. "No good, huh?" he told Imoogi, before firmly telling himself to stop talking to a stuffed dragon, and sneaking out from his personal cocoon over to Theo's bed. Sure enough, Theo had some more advanced Transfiguration texts inside his trunk, and it was a ridiculous surge of triumph to successfully summon the trunk to him in silence, extract the books he wanted, and slide it back in place with his wand unnoticed.

He lost track of time after that, but he could hear the distant sound of birds beginning to chirp outside the stone walls before he could go out and smuggle the books back into Theo's trunk again. Once finished, the bracelet was hardly a match for the picture he'd had in his head, something like a bracelet his mother often wore to formal occasions on the more arcane magical holidays, which a house elf had told him upon interrogation was a gift from Father on occasion of Draco's christening. His mother's had a larger, more grown dragon's tooth, sideways on the string as the point of interest rather than a sideways baby one, with a shower of diamonds between a series of black opals all along the string, embossing the top of the fang on one side like a dagger hilt.

Whereas Draco had transfigured some of the beads on Imoogi's original necklace, along with wood chipped from his bed and pieces of pipes and metal purloined from the Slytherin bathroom, into tiny crystals instead of diamonds, and African turquoises instead of the opals. But the effect of it didn't strike him as too different, not after he mottled the turquoises and used his wand to carefully carve one to a charm like his mother's instead of just a sphere. And turquoises were supposed to be stones that gave mental clarity, so that fit Granger.

It had taken ages to find the right spells in all of Theo's books, some of it his own invention with half-remembered, half-invented combinations of old Latin roots from his childhood

lessons, which somehow managed to work and not murder him. It had taken ages after that to remember the shapes of Mother's opals, but he had been seized with the irrational desire to do Mother's priceless bracelet justice, and so he put off sleep to carve at least one stone to its proper form: an intricate Kali yantra. He had not done anything as magically difficult as all this intricate Transfiguration since he'd fallen through this mirror, perhaps not even the dark curses he'd cast at the Manor, but he trusted implicitly in the same explanation that always seemed to work with Muggleborn Granger: *Oh, my wizard parents taught me how when I was young.*

Granted, he hadn't needed to make it so elaborate. But somehow, it didn't feel as satisfying a demonstration against Father's haughty commands, if the birthday present he delivered the girl the morning after Father forbade him her company looked ugly or *cheap*.

He had forgotten this was the morning Potter got his Nimbus 2000, an arrival whose news had enraged him at the time, but was just satisfying this time, as further proof he'd succeeded in not messing up the part that Quidditch held in Potter's destiny. He derived far more satisfaction, though, from watching Father's poor old Claudius put to service delivering a simple parchment-wrapped package beside Granger's breakfast, making her head snap around wildly before Claudius swooped off no doubt sourly back towards the Owlery.

Potter's long package had drawn most all of the Gryffindor attention- how anyone hadn't instantly known it a broomstick was beyond him- so no one but him was watching as Granger found her present, along with the note he'd only remembered to scribble last-minute and very drowsily- *Happy 12th, Granger.* He ducked out of sight as soon as she looked up, worried she would embarrass him either with showy rejection or an excessive show of gratitude, and took the departure of Zabini to slip out of the hall between him and Vince and Greg.

He didn't see her until she came up to him at their table after dinner. He was staring at a truly empty piece of parchment, wondering what on Earth to write to his father, when Granger surprised him with a hissed whisper, "Draco, may I speak with you?" Draco looked up and frowned, gesturing for her to sit down. He jerked his head towards the stacks, and she just crossed her arms.

"Outside," she ordered, which meant he was likely in for a scene one way or another, but he was comforted at least as he followed her by the sight of the dragon tooth bracelet glistening mottled blue on her wrist.

Draco dropped his charmed bag on the grass as soon as they had finished the trek outside, blinking blearily in the excessive sunlight, his lack of sleep starting to catch up with him. She kept them walking, though, until they had reached the Quidditch stands of all places, the sun already half-set in the sky. "I thought you hated Quidditch," he asked, bemused, and she heaved a sigh before dropping onto one of the wooden benches.

"Well, no one's on the schedule to practice today," she said impatiently, "So I've found it a good place to go to then, for some peace and quiet away from these *children*." He was a bit amused and a bit appalled that she seemed to have picked up his manner of referring to their classmates. "And I do need to speak with you. Draco, I can't accept this."

So it was the ostentatious humility reaction to prompt this extraordinary semi-kidnapping. He would have preferred worshipful gratitude. He looked down where she had pushed her wrist forward into the glint of sunset, and had to marvel at his own craftsmanship. "Why not?"

"It's too much," she insisted, shaking her wrist emphatically. "I know your family is rich, but still, this must have cost a fortune..."

He hadn't planned to boast about his Transfiguration prowess, but if he *had* to... "It didn't cost a thing, Granger, so you might want to reconsider any future career in magical jewel assessment. I took a necklace off a toy dragon and transfigured it- Pansy's dragon," he hastily added, so she wouldn't think he had something that childish with him. Even if it being a dragon might give it away regardless. "She didn't mind, she didn't want the toy anyway, so..."

Granger looked astonished for a moment. "You transfigured *this*? How? Are these real gemstones? Will they stay like this?"

"Just crystal and turquoise," Draco said with false modesty, "And yes, there's a charm that makes sure," but if anything, she looked less contented with that information.

"Then that's even more incredible, Draco," she said, looking almost misty-eyed. "You went to that much trouble for me?"

"It wasn't that much work," Draco lied, and she eyed him with a strangely regretful look.

"It looks like it was, and you made it yourself? That's much better than just something you spent a lot of money on in a store." *It is?* "I'm so sorry." She took a deep breath, the pink in the sunset casting a lovely glow from the crystals in her bracelet onto the wooden edge of the stands. "Draco, although we have not yet known each other a month, I have come to respect your cleverness and thoughtfulness. I am so grateful for your generosity, not just with this beautiful bracelet but of your time studying with me. Whatever anyone says of your family, I hope you know I see many good qualities in you- and although you say we aren't friends, I would feel privileged to someday call myself your friend. Just... *only* your friend."

She bit her lip as if dealing some fatal blow. "We're still first-years, and far too young to think about dating anyone, it's only proper we focus on our studies, and Draco, I don't see you that way, I'm sorry-" The speech seemed to be losing steam as she got to the meat of it. "I do like you, but just as a friend, though I know you don't want to be friends, but- what? Why are you laughing?"

"Granger!" Draco gasped out, holding his stomach from laughing so hard it was beginning to hurt. "You- that's what this is? Bringing me out here?" The isolated location suddenly made sense. She had thought she was being considerate, letting him down gently where no one would have to witness his embarrassment. "You think I gave you that bracelet because I *fancy* you?"

Granger had gone more scarlet than a Weasley on Christmas. "Well, what am I supposed to think, Draco? You say we aren't friends, but you give me this fancy jewelry, and-"

Granger had clearly learned everything she knew about romance in books, and probably Muggle ones at that. "Merlin, Granger, the ideas you get in that head. Don't worry, you couldn't be safer with me, I promise. There is no chance of that ever, ever being an issue between us. I could never fancy *you.*"

Unexpectedly, rather than looking pleased to have settled this mutual misunderstanding, Granger's face crumpled. "What do you mean, *me*? What's wrong with me? Why is it so funny to think somebody *could*?" She looked alarmingly close to tears suddenly, though he had never actually made her cry before. "Is it because I'm..." He thought she might say Gryffindor or Muggleborn, but instead she finished desolately, "Not pretty?"

Another sharp bark of laughter was surprised out of Draco, and she shot him the most vicious look imaginable, as if his amusement was at the expense of her supposed hideousness. "What? No, Granger, it's not that at all," he laughed, shaking his head at the image of the girl who Victor Krum took to the Yule Ball, fretting after her looks. He supposed she was rather bushy-haired and buck-toothed now, but he still had in his head the memory of how pretty she would grow up to be. The need to disabuse her of her insecurity startled the truth out of him. "You're a girl, that's all." She looked at him blankly. "I don't fancy girls, Granger. Any of them." Still no comprehension in that usually clever face. "Only boys, alright? Just blokes. I'm gay." He pulled out the talon wand to demonstrate. "Bent as my wand, alright? Does that make it clear enough?"

He had to laugh all the harder at the bafflement on her face. He was clutching his stomach and bent over with it by the time she elbowed him in the ribs. "Ssh! Look, someone's down there!"

Draco's laughter froze in his throat when he saw Harry Potter below them, and then above them, kicking off the ground and soaring up on his new Nimbus 2000. "Don't worry," he told Granger, "He won't see us, we're behind the corner in the shadow," and drew them right beside the wall of the stands.

"That's Harry!" Granger hissed. "He's been put on the Gryffindor Quidditch team! As a reward for bad behavior! Have you ever heard the like?" Well, however she was taking the spontaneous revelation of Draco's sexuality, it wasn't keeping her from her favorite pastimes, like complaining about rule-breaking. Her words could hardly make any argument as eloquent as the sight of Potter's speed, swooping through the goalposts and then lapping around the pitch with the vigor of a killing curse hurtling towards its victim. "First-years aren't supposed to be allowed to play. If he gets to be Seeker, then you should have a chance for Slytherin. You're just as good as he is."

He wasn't, but that hot-headed show of loyalty from Granger proved her to be taking his revelation well. "Even though I'm bent?"

"Oh, I don't care about *that*," Granger said crossly, "I know all about it, my uncle is also like that, he's got a partner who comes round, and I've read about it, it doesn't matter. You might have just *said*. You can see how anyone would misinterpret." Her eyes tracked Potter with resentful bullishness, as did Draco's. Watching Potter resentfully was somewhere between sleeping and casting spells in his most frequent life occupations. "My father told me Uncle Gary has always known. That he was born that way. Is it like that for you as well?"

"Yeah," Draco lied, "I've always known," and felt his shoulders relax, with a relief that felt surreal, it was so inappropriately strong. But this *was* actually the first person he had ever told, in either timeline. 'Telling' Theo with a drunken blow job didn't really count.

It was nice to be able to lie like that, imagining a version of himself that hadn't agonized and bargained with himself and been in denial over so much of who he was. To come back to Hogwarts and reinvent Draco Malfoy from the start, as some effortless genius who just happened to know everything in the classes already, because he was just naturally so brilliant, and as some independent confident thinker who accepted his own identity. Who didn't let his father push him around, or anyone else, and didn't go out of his way to push anyone else around either, because he didn't have time. He had to study. He was going to be an Unspeakable.

Not pushing anyone else, that was, unless they tried to push him first. Then he would destroy them.

He wondered if that was what Potter saw of him, if not just the same annoying caricature of a poncy Slytherin as last time. If he actually had impressed Potter more, with the deck stacked with seven years of bonus knowledge and foreknowledge of everything to boot, or at least made Potter less likely to pity him.

Because he knew what he saw when he looked at Potter like this, slicing through the air with the sun dropping behind the horizon behind him, before responding to a call from Oliver Wood below and flying gracefully down. It didn't seem fair for anyone to be that much of a natural, to be put on a broom once or twice and magically fly like he'd spent his whole life only in the air. Like even the ether around them was in love with Potter and rearranged itself to suit him, putting the wind at his back as the least that the Chosen One deserved.

Potter was everything Draco had ever wanted to be, and give Draco a second chance, give him fifty lifetimes to try again over and over, he would never get anywhere close.

Dear Mother,

Please inform Father that I have a different idea of what brings shame upon the Malfoy name. I would be pleased to correspond with him, should he be interested in a productive dialogue rather than indulging rumors spread by the jealous and mediocre of Hogwarts.

Please inform Father that the prolonged length of my Sorting was due to the Hat's difficulty in choosing which house best befit my many virtues. The hat told me, and I quote, that I was difficult to place because I had not only the courage of Gryffindor but the discernment and clear thought of Ravenclaw, the faith and good-heartedness of Hufflepuff, and the ruthlessness of Slytherin. After taking the time necessary to catalog my many astonishing merits, and remarking on my great potential in any pursuit I shall take, he agreed to submit to my superior judgment and to send me, of course, to Slytherin.

Please inform Father that whatever he may have been told of the Quidditch incident with Harry Potter, he has been misinformed if he was not also told that Potter was the instigator of

it all, due to the prompting of his friend the blood traitor Ronald Weasley, who hates our family, speaks ill of Father personally, and seeks our disgrace along with his entire family, perhaps to the point of spreading some of these false rumors. I can assure you I am most well-respected in Slytherin, and my classmates often look to me as an example.

The Gryffindor that Father speaks of is indeed Muggleborn, by the name of Hermione Granger. She is a rare exception that proves the rule to the general unworthiness of her foul-blooded kind. My mother and father would do well to acquaint themselves with the name, as while you have taught me of the importance of blood purity, you have also taught me of the importance of recognizing an extraordinary opportunity when it presents itself and seizing on it, for such may never appear again. With the exceptional discernment native to a Malfoy, I quickly deduced upon first acquaintance with the first-year Hogwarts class that Granger possesses an intellect and ambition that will lead her to prominence in the future. She is not only the brightest witch of our year, but the brightest wizard, probably of all years, and quite possibly of our generation. She may be Minister of Magic someday. If you and Father find this judgment precipitous or outrageous, I look forward to the passing of time to prove me correct.

Rest assured I hold no childish infatuation for this Mudblood, nor even friendship. Our relation is academic in nature, as she is invaluable in my studies. My priority is my studies above all else, as I must achieve exceptional results, not only as a Malfoy, but because I am going to be an Unspeakable.

Yours sincerely,

Draco Malfoy

The Blue Loop

As the weeks passed and October advanced to a close, Draco came to two disturbing conclusions. One, he was losing the will to even think about confessing the truth to Severus. Two, he might have prevented Granger from becoming friends with Potter and Weasley.

Halloween was a crisis point, a distinct marker of time after which he could no longer excuse his own inaction. He roused himself enough to go to a professor that morning, not Severus but McGonagall, who seemed the cleverest person if you were too afraid of making Severus suspicious, or of looking directly at Albus Dumbledore for more than two to three seconds. That tended to make him begin hyperventilating or have to go hurl up his guts in a corner. So he hung around at the end of Transfiguration with Hufflepuff that morning, entertaining the idea of saying there might be a troll in the castle tonight and seeing what happened.

"Mr. Malfoy? May I help you?"

She hadn't seemed to like him since the incident in flying lessons. Rather hypocritical, when it had single-handedly delivered her a Seeker. "I had a question, Professor. Not about Transfiguration," he said, with his best air of innocent first-year, "But I didn't know who else to ask about it. See, my ambition for the end of my studies is to become an Unspeakable."

McGonagall looked less hostile, corner of her lip turning up. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy, I may have overheard you expressing that ambition once or twice in passing."

She was being facetious, but the character he was playing read her as earnest. "Yes, Professor, and I've been given to understand that one of the studies of the Unspeakables is time travel. So I've been reading about it, you see."

McGonagall looked interested for the first time, settling back into her seat. "Time travel, Mr. Malfoy? Yes, I have had some acquaintance with the subject. In fact, I may be the best-qualified person at Hogwarts for you to ask."

Hogwarts included *Dumbledore*. But McGonagall wasn't the sort to brag idly. "I've read a lot, but there's this story in a fiction book that bothers me. The hero doesn't travel the normal way. He was 32, went ten years back, and then his mind was in his 22-year-old *body*."

"And where was his 22-year-old mind?" McGonagall asked without missing a beat.

Draco winced at a question he should have already been asking. "I don't think it would be possible to travel that way, but if it was- how bad could the traveler mess up the past? How would the mechanics even work? And in the end, the hero thinks it's impossible to ever go back. But do you think it wouldn't be?"

McGonagall was smiling, seemingly in pleasure at the theoretical aspect. "Hmm," she said, and then flicked her wand and levitated two pencils, turning one red and the other blue before casting a Spongify and softening them to malleable colored lead. *See, Potter, that's how you use that bloody spell.* "An interesting riddle, Mr. Malfoy. Let us say the blue thread is the

original, until the point that time traveler's mind departs that timeline, and the red timeline is the new timeline that begins in the moment the traveler's mind reenters its body at an earlier age." McGonagall tapped her wand and an eraser reformed into a small, cute pink figure of a person. "Do you understand?"

Draco stepped up to the desk and touched the threads once she let them down. "Before traveling," he said, "After traveling," and stared at them. Then he put the red line beside the blue, but not quite parallel, with the threads the same length but the blue closer to him and the red starting and ending later. "May I?" he asked, taking another pencil, and drew lines on the desk surface to Scourgify after, marking arbitrary points on the line as 32 for the end of the blue line, and 22 as the start of the red line, a bit along the blue line. He made them 11 and 18 in his head. Then he walked the stick figure up from the base of the blue line to the end of it.

"He's born..." Draco narrated, "He lives normally, in this one timeline, one life, like most everyone does, but then he's 32 and he goes back to 22, and that's the start of the second timeline. So... the first timeline ends at 32, and the second timeline only starts at 22."

"Well-reasoned, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall said. "Sometimes it can help to visualize. So in this diagram the way you placed them, the first blue is without a future, and the first red is without a past." She stopped, looking amused when Draco pulled out one of his notebooks and began to scribble notes, only to ask the question Granger never seemed to get up the nerve to. "Invisible ink?"

"Yes, Professor," Draco said, then looked up eagerly, pencil and notebook in hand.

She pointed down. "How can this be? Can any person's life be without a past or a future? Without birth or death? There is a flaw in your diagram. Can you explain it?"

Draco drew with his finger in front of the red line. "The red line should extend as far as the blue, since it's the same past up to 22. But it's alright for the blue line to stop, because it did end at 32. The only future is the red one. Does that mean that the blue line is dead from then on? That there ceases to be a blue 'future'?"

"Correct," McGonagall said, "And yet not. You say yourself that the past for this hero is the same up to 22. So why are they different colors? Is not the past for the red line blue?" She tapped her wand, and the red line tilted to affix its end to blue at 22. "What you make of this?"

Draco stared at the two lines with a sinking feeling. "A true line doesn't bend, Professor. The red line can't work like that." He traced the pink figure over the straight blue to 22, and then the veering angle after. The curve was a bit like his talon wand. "It has to be straight. So it has to be parallel to the blue line again. But- if they have to share the blue past- the red line can't be straight unless it's exactly on top of the blue line after the past." McGonagall flicked her wand, and the red line went straight from 22 to the other edge of the desk, growing out and superimposing itself over the blue past 22. "So you're saying there's only one line. That the red takes over from the blue, and the blue there was here..." Draco ran the figure alongside 22 to 32, in an imaginary space for the blue line. "What was past before the red line was made- the past is gone?"

"There is no past, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall explained patiently. "There is only ever one timeline, whatever travel is made. To everyone outside of the traveler, the line would simply appear as unbroken." She flicked her wand and turned it all purple. Draco's heart turned over in his chest before the blue and red came back. "The traveler overwrites his own memories."

"But they weren't an *illusion*," Draco tried to insist. "There *was* a blue line, wasn't there? Here." He traced the imaginary one he had made on the desk. "It can't just have disappeared, right?"

"Correct again, Mr. Malfoy. The diagram is still incomplete." McGonagall made sure she had his attention, then restored the blue line from 22 to 32 above the red line, letting it hover so he could see it. Then she lifted it and sent it linking in a circle around the pink figure's head, orbiting around it like a halo. "This is where the traveler's past would go, I would hazard. The only evidence of an old reality would reside in the traveler's mind."

"Just memory," Draco breathed. "So- the minute the traveler went back, he killed his own past? He has to live out those years again? And- he can't go back, because there's nowhere to go back to? And that- and that's what makes there only be one timeline..."

"Classic limited time travel works," McGonagall said, "On such assumptions." She made another diagram by duplicating charms, but with only a single blue line and pink figure. She used the pencil to draw lines marking noon and midnight, then walked the figure from the start of the line, past noon, to midnight. "The traveler goes back here." She tapped the pink figure at midnight and doubled him again, then put them both back at noon. "There are now two of our hero at noon, active from noon to midnight. The hero living out the timeline the first time, and the time traveler living out the timeline alongside the original the second time. And then at midnight, we have a problem, do we not? Shall two go on and live forever? No, we reach the point wherein the original took the decision to become the time traveler. The original disappears, to go back to noon, and the time traveler can continue on alone to live afterwards. From noon to midnight, we have this infinite loop, but at its end, there is only one person carrying on, when the traveler leaves to go time travel. Now, do you see the largest difference between this scenario and our first?"

"Two figures," Draco said, "Instead of only one."

"Correct," McGonagall said crisply. "Time travel as we know it works by the creation of these closed loops, in which one person becomes two of themselves acting at once, allowing him to be two places at once. But this requires two separate bodies. Let us try this without the splitting." She led the pink figure from noon to midnight, and then picked up the figure and jumped it from midnight back to noon. "If only a mind travels, and there is only one body present, the loop cannot form. So the progress would have no loop. Only this." She ran the one figure from midnight to noon and past it until the end of the desk. "Whatever occurred from noon to midnight the first time the traveler experienced, it would only have happened in the traveler's memory. The loop has been transferred to the traveler's mind, which cannot be undone. At least in the only version of reality the traveler can access. We would have to speak of alternate realities and dimensions to surpass that. And to my knowledge, these are not mysteries that wizards have yet conquered."

Draco picked up the figure with the discarded blue line still hovering forlornly over its head. "So except if it's some alternate dimension, there's only one body, so the loop can't happen, and there's no original future to go back to." McGonagall nodded. "So it's not a question of messing up a past. Everything is happening for everyone for the first time in the world here. Except the traveler." Draco ran the figure over the red line with the feeling of a dream, then began to take notes again. It was that or start screaming. "So... the traveler can't screw up the past, because there is no past?"

"Such would be my supposition, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall sighed. "It would make sense for time travelling of the mind to begin and end within that mind. Yes, the red line would inevitably bear many of the same features as the blue. All the same billions of people and forces and events would theoretically function with the same motivations and underlying processes as in the blue line. *Their* essential character has presumably not been altered. Only the traveler has been, and only in the mind. The only alterations, then, from the memory of his first experience, would then derive exclusively from differences in the actions and influence exerted by the changed traveler, rebounding into the world. Something like what Muggles call the butterfly effect."

Draco copied her explanation of the effect by rote, both mind and body gradually going number. "So what would be the best thing for the traveler to do, then?" he finally asked. "Say he didn't go back on purpose. Say it was by mistake. And he wants life to be like these memories in his head. For the red to be as blue as possible. The butterfly just has to flap his wings exactly the same?"

"That would be one idea," McGonagall mused. "The passive school of thought, as it were. Change as little as possible, though that depends on the traveler's ability to accurately remember and recreate his memories. The smallest changes can have the largest ripples. The other school of thought would be active. To take the assumption that goals can be best achieved not by retracing the steps to their accomplishment in his memory, but actively pursuing those goals, by whichever methods seem most effective in his present. As if the memory did not exist, which would progressively devalue its usefulness. Is this the answer you were seeking, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Which approach is right?" Draco was unable to breathe until she answered,

"I cannot say, but I can only assume that it would depend upon the individual."

Draco's usual path out of Transfiguration went to the library, but he couldn't gather himself enough to choose between library or dungeons. For some reason, his steps took him to the charms classroom. It was only upon arrival, watching a stream of red and gold scarves pour out from a class that ended after his, that he realized it was because Gryffindor had Charms in the same period.

He didn't know if it was Potter or Granger or someone else his hindbrain had decided he was waiting for, but both were soon heading in his direction. He walked towards them, mind completely blank of what to say to either, only to catch what Weasley was saying to Potter in none too soft a voice. "It's no wonder no one can stand her," Draco heard him say, the one eavesdropping for once. "She's a nightmare, honestly." It didn't occur to Draco that Weasley could possibly be talking about Granger until Granger knocked into Potter and pushed past

them. Draco caught a glimpse of her face streaming with tears, where it had been dry before, before she disappeared down the hall, without seeming to notice him there. But she had clearly heard Weasley. And heard Potter not saying a word to dispute Weasley's judgment.

"I think she heard you," Potter said guiltily.

"So?" Weasley said, looking a bit queasy. "She must've noticed she's got no friends."

"What," Draco growled, stepping right in the way of the two of them, "Has gone wrong in your head, you imbecilic, blockheaded, pathetic excuse for a Gryffindor?"

Potter and Weasley exchanged a guilty glance, before turning back to Draco defiantly. "You- you heard what I said? And that Hermione overheard? Malfoy, I didn't mean her to hear-"

"Oh, I was talking to Potter," Draco seethed, "I haven't even gotten started on *you.*"

He could tolerate only a second of the two's stunned, vacant stares before he had seized them both by the arm and dragged them bodily into the empty trophy room just down the hall, where Potter had beaten him in that travesty of a duel. He wasn't thinking to show off his magical power when he flicked his wand at the nearest candles, lighting them wordlessly and setting them floating, but it made Potter and Weasley inch together uneasily. It was all too easy to impress first-years, with something any seventh-year could do without blinking. The choice to close the door with a bark of *Ventus* to slam it mightily shut, well, *that* might have been to intimidate.

"Malfoy, we have class," Potter said nervously, at the same time Weasley complained,

"Why are you flipping your lid this bad, Malfoy? I wish she hadn't heard us, of course I didn't want to make her cry, but it was just an accident-"

"It's one thing to punch *me* in a duel. Fine, I cursed you first, *whatever.* But what was it *she* did to you? Being bossy? Just an insufferable know-it-all? Showing you up in class like she always does?" Their guiltier faces told him enough. "And that's all? What, and that's an excuse to be cruel?"

"What is this? You're gonna give us a lesson on how not to be cruel?" Weasley said, crossing his arms defensively. "You? *Malfoy*? The dark wizard?"

"Yes. Exactly. I *am* a Malfoy. And you're *not*. You're not- you're not supposed to act like this. How could *you* be cruel like that?" Draco blurted, without a clue what he was saying anymore. "You're supposed to be better!"

"Why," Potter said stubbornly, those lovely green eyes clouded and guarded. "Because we're Gryffindors? So we're held to a higher standard?"

"*Because you're Harry Potter*!" Draco yelled, and the candles in the air went up higher without him meaning to. "And you're Harry Potter's best friend! You're the one he chose, aren't you, Weasley?" He turned on Potter, the real object of his disappointment. "You're Harry Potter!" Or he had been, unless Draco had ruined things with Granger somehow, and

the world was going to end because these two wandering ventriloquist dummies would be sans ventriloquist.

"You keep saying and saying that, Malfoy," Potter said, jaw tensing like he wanted to hit something, "Like it means something."

"Because it does!" Draco got in Potter's face, if that was the only way to make him see him for once. "It does, Potter, your *existence* means something, you're the Boy Who Lived, you stand for something even if you don't want to, even if it's too much burden for a bloody first-year because tough luck, you don't have a choice! You, Potter, you're supposed to be good and kind and do the right thing and not look down on people, that's your whole thing, isn't it, that's what makes you important! That's what makes you different from people like my father! My father was a Death Eater, you worthless fool, and *he* looks down on that girl. You shouldn't be *anything* like him."

By the time Draco finished, Weasley was staring at him like he'd grown a second and third head. Potter's face behind those moon-shaped glasses changed, though- not quite like Draco's words were sinking in, but at least as if he couldn't ignore how much Draco believed them. "I didn't know you loved your girlfriend so much," Weasley sniped, "You wouldn't stand up for her like this if you didn't fancy her," and Draco was so angry that any trace of self-preservation disappeared.

"I'm bent, you numbskull! Bent, gay, whatever you want to call it, I don't even like girls, so you don't have that excuse for the Slytherin being a more decent human being than you! I don't fancy her, she's not even my friend, I just study with her, but I've seen enough to know she's worth a hundred of both of you, *Chosen One*! She's brilliant, and you can be jealous of that if you like because Salazar knows you don't have enough brains to knock two sickles together, but it doesn't mean you get to treat her like- like- forget it!"

Draco stalked out of the trophy room, feeling his robe billow behind him like Severus's without even trying. It was easier, it turned out, when there was that much spite behind every step. But he did walk away, and he was proud of that.

It was only a bit after, sitting there very late to Charms, that he wondered whether he might have taken out a bit of his frustration over McGonagall's answer on them.

He was glad for the memory of the troll on Halloween, reconfirmed by a check in his notebook, for the excuse to skip out on dinner entirely. He went to the kitchens after his last class, and managed to wheedle some of the Halloween feast out of the elves early. What made him just that bit more depressed was the lack of any news about Dobby once again. But it seemed the sight of his real solicitousness and disappointment that prompted the elves to go from grudgingly giving a few pieces of candy, to packing a personal bag of more treats than he could carry. A Featherlight charm took care of that, and he hid inside his curtains with his food, notebooks, wand, and Imoogi right beside his pillow, with one part of his mind trying to puzzle out everything McGonagall had told him, and another trying not to think at all, ever again.

He had erased Harry Potter's victory. There was no world to go back to where the Dark Lord was gone for good. Draco had killed that world. And so the timeline was not pre-written, was

without any guarantee that events would unfold as before. There were some time travel mechanics where the traveler couldn't change the past in any significant way whatever he did, but here, there was nothing for Draco to exact change *on*, except memories. And he'd already changed them. He should have known when Granger started sitting at his table, when Longbottom's cauldron didn't melt- when he'd ordered Dobby to disobey his Father, and found Aunt Bella's wand in his hand. The wand was proof of the malleability of his memory, and of the power he had been granted. He had thought himself unsuited to making even the most basic decisions, and now so many were thrust into his hands, he might as well have had none at all.

He was glad for that month in Malfoy Manor, miserable and useless as it had felt at the time, to record everything he remembered of the first go around while still fresh. Superfluous as he had hoped the notebooks would be, it seemed now that he would need them, all of them. He was going to have to live it all over again, passive or active. He'd been trying for the passive, or at least he thought he had, but just reliving the events exactly as they had been would mean Vince and Severus dead, with Father in Azkaban, temporarily and then permanently- would mean taking the Dark Mark, the mission against Dumbledore, Potter's curse in Myrtle's bathroom, letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts, Severus killing Dumbledore, Voldemort at the Manor, torturing prisoners, Lovegood and Ollivander and Potter's trio captive again, Aunt Bella torturing Granger-

Aunt Bella wanting her wand back, which he *would* be here to face, unequivocally now.

It was lucky he had cast the Muffliato, because he hadn't had a fit this bad since he saw Vince on the Hogwarts Express. Struggling to breathe and to stop sobbing when he was this alone, it went on for some length of time that felt to stretch towards infinity, before he finally slept. At least it had been an interval he hadn't had to think.

The other Slytherin boys were none-too-pleased to see him when he emerged the next morning, though his hair was starting to grow long enough to let hang in his eyes and hide any swollenness. After Vince let Draco in on the tale of a troll attack, and Draco tiredly feigned surprise, the air of the other boys turned colder. Blaise was the one to start complaining about Draco's absence, and their return to the dormitory and the realization Draco wasn't with them. Theo sounded as hurt as he did curious as they outlined their failures to open Draco's curtains to ensure he was inside, eventually assuming Draco had charmed the curtains locked and the outside silent, rather than going to alert Severus of Draco's absence with the castle in peril.

"Well, why didn't you?" Draco drawled, finding himself irrationally impatient and irritated once again by other people getting upset, rather like the Gryffindors' apoplexy over him possibly getting Potter expelled. It seemed ridiculous on their parts to have ever panicked, when he had known throughout how things were going to go, but they didn't have his privileged vantage point. One or two of his old friends might even have been concerned about him.

The others exchanged uneasy glances. "Do you always close off your bed like that, Draco?" Blaise finally asked. "What are you doing in there?"

Reading, writing, cuddling a stuffed dragon. Occasionally engaging in experimental Transfiguration, respiratory failure, or masturbation. "And that's a concern of yours how, Zabini?"

"Seriously, what are you doing, Draco?" Theo prodded.

"Practicing dark magic, of course," Draco dead-panned, only not to earn a single laugh.

Vince and Greg exchanged a nervous glance of their own. "Draco wasn't at dinner at all. Like he knew what was coming," Vince said to Greg in the world's worst covert whisper. "Maybe he's the one who let the troll into the dungeons."

At first, Draco thought they had to be joking, but none of them so much as cracked a smile. "Oh, come off it, Vince, really?" There was no levity in their eyes whatsoever. "Oh, yes, of course, you've caught me. I *am* a Malfoy, you know. Well-known Dark Lords of trollkind." Still no laughter! "Really? You don't actually think- please, it would be moronic. The troll almost killed Granger, and I need her to help me study to become an Unspeakable. If I wanted to mess with Hogwarts, do you think I'd do anything so *sloppy*?"

Instead of finally receiving the comprehension and apologies that Draco's admirable logic merited, the air went if anything more tense, in a dormitory that felt too small for all five of them. Had something worse happened to Granger than he remembered?

Salazar be damned. He didn't need to get out a notebook to remember how Halloween had happened- *Potter, Weasley, Granger take down troll in girl's bathroom, get points for Gryffindor despite suicidal idiocy.* Except if Granger had been off crying, maybe in the bathroom instead of Gryffindor Tower as Draco had naively assumed- and Potter and Weasley, alienated from her by Draco, hadn't come running to her rescue- he hadn't thought he could have already- Granger could be-

"Draco," Theo said slowly, "If you've been charmed inside your bed all night, how did you know that the Gryffindors went after the troll?"

The chill that went through him at catching his own mistake was outmatched by relief at the sound of Gryffindors, plural. "I take it they're all alright?" Draco asked as uninterestedly as possible, and managed not to smile at Vince's fearful nod. But there were still four stares growing more and more accusing. "Well, that's obviously because I could see it all through the eyes of *my* troll," Draco went drolly, and not one laugh even then. He'd used to throw these children into hysterics with a mere gesture. Was he just not funny anymore?

Or they were scared of him. He supposed that could be useful too.

When he reached the Great Hall in his knot of terrorized purebloods, he saw Granger for once not apart from the other Gryffindor first-years, but beside Potter and Weasley, chattering together excitedly in their own world. It had been a familiar sight before, perpetually annoying but hardly surprising, and yet it sent an inexplicable rush of spite through Draco as he sat, his own distance from his classmates maintained. He had wanted to be an outsider, and he should be grateful Granger wasn't any longer, that she had taken her rightful place at

Potter's side to keep him safe. Grateful she had that place by Potter, a place he could never have.

He felt 11 again, though, staring at the distant form of Potter, ready to choke on his breakfast out of a half-acknowledged, corrosive sort of envy. Before, he had begrudged Potter the attention, as he seemed to be getting now, other Gryffindors congratulating them with rumors spreading through all four tables of the heroic exploits of the great Harry Potter, and how the newest points he'd won from Gryffindor had been for taking on a twelve-foot mountain troll before he was even twelve years old. Draco remembered listening to this rubbish the first time and sniping to Vince and Greg how unimpressive it actually was to take on a troll, how he could have done it all alone and probably better. But it wasn't the notoriety that made his chest hurt now. It was the sight of the trio properly joined by their ordeal, which sounded just the sort of thing to knit a friendship that Draco's influence had clumsily wounded. And Draco had thought he would be fine, turning to a walking ghost, pretending not to exist, purposefully situating himself on the outside looking in. When he had thought Severus would be sending him back to 1998 days later. But this was forever, without even Slytherins to comfort him with false praise.

"Are you alright, Draco?" Theo asked him quietly out of nowhere. And a part of Draco was pathetically grateful, even as he squared his shoulders, put on a superior face, and drawled,

"Oh, just wondering what these awful professors have done with my troll."

The Howler

Granger took her customary position beside Draco at Potions, though she came over from talking to Potter and Weasley only just before class started. "Did you hear what happened with the troll?" she hissed, and Draco was glad for the chance to shush her to avoid Severus's wrath. And it was a perpetual challenge to avoid that capricious displeasure, even for Draco, since he'd started partnering up each week with a student that Severus despised as much as know-it-all Granger.

Draco had to hear about Potter's heroic exploits throughout the brewing process, which was unfortunately too easy for both of them to require much concentration, even with Granger's hyperactive paranoia about getting a single detail wrong. Having the two of them work together was almost like cheating, he'd heard Pansy complaining once, saying it wasn't fair to have the best ones from each house partnered making everyone else look bad. He'd thought it sour grapes on her part, assuming she wanted to be the girl paired with the Malfoy heir, but he could empathize with her now, as their superior skill let them finish early and subjected him to a deluge of unwanted anecdotal detail from an oblivious Granger.

Which was fine and good in comparison with the final piece of the puzzle she insisted on imparting, which was the supposedly suspicious presence of Severus, heading towards the room with the three-headed dog that the Gryffindors had discovered after their midnight duel. Draco was subjected to the whole beastly story about Potter seeing Hagrid get a package from Gringotts in secret, which they thought the break-in at Gringotts had been a tardy attempt to steal, as if the largest Wizarding bank in the world was some schoolchild's cupboard which could only hold one large item inside. They didn't have any real theory as to what that item was, other than something magical and dangerous, but they seemed convinced Severus was evil and trying to steal it.

Perhaps he had been precipitous telling his father Granger was the cleverest of their generation.

And clearly, whatever manner of interaction he and Granger had shared, it bore nothing remotely akin to the nature of friendship. At least on *her* part, if she could say all this, without knowing he would sooner hear ill spoken of his own father than Severus. Even if he hadn't known of Severus's ultimate martyrdom, for the sake of her and her idiotic savior's triumph. His implicit belief in Severus was such, that even if Severus had been trying to steal some guarded secret package deep in the bowels of the school, he was sure Severus must have a good reason for it.

He tried to keep his defense of Severus in moderate terms as they exited Potions that day, but his absolute manner of dismissing the Gryffindors' concerns made it clear that he would suffer no aspersions cast against his Head of House. That afternoon, when Granger brought Potter and Weasley to their library table, Draco was ready to start jinxing spare Gryffindors for their temerity, pulling up chairs as if they had every right. But at least they didn't say anything against Severus.

Weasley and Potter left earlier than him and Granger, and as soon as they were gone, Draco shot Granger with the kind of death stare it took real effort to make so withering. But she still dragged Potter and Weasley there for the rest of the weekend, until Draco was finally compelled to openly challenge her. "Why do you keep bringing those two blunderbusses? They don't care about studying, they're useless. And they don't want to be here anyway."

Granger reddened. "Well, it's not like they don't have homework of their own to do. And I thought... you're hard to get a hold of outside the library, we don't really see you except in Potions." *We,* was it now? Which was what he had hoped for, what he had berated Potter over, so he couldn't start feeling bitter Granger and her boys were a package deal. "And... I suppose now that I'm getting on better with Harry and Ron, I hoped that all four of us could be friends."

Ever the idealist, this one. "Oh, and that's what the boys want as well, is it? Moved on from punching me in the face and calling my father a Death Eater to courting my favor?"

Granger blinked in confusion. "*You're* always calling your father that."

Draco felt his cheeks go red. "That's different," he hissed. "Don't try and force this, Granger." The idea of joining Potter's trio was the most ridiculous he'd ever heard, worse than enchanted time travel mirrors. For Salazar's sake, half his year in Slytherin suspected Draco was a dark wizard at large already. "I don't fit there and we both know it." He'd spent a long time over the past days, time he should have been studying writing those two words over and over, *Passive* and *Active*, trying to decide between them. The default was by nature passive, unless he could convince himself his own efforts to drive the future would be more effective than a memory he knew for sure would work. Either way, there was no version of reality where he and Potter could ever be friends.

"They wouldn't mind," Granger tried, giving Draco the excuse to scoff more openly.

"Oh, well, if they wouldn't *mind*," Draco drawled.

Granger winced, hearing how it had sounded. "No, well- they don't *hate* you, Draco, I know- there's been, um, trouble between you- there was that Quidditch game, and the duel, and I don't know what else-"

"Exactly. Potter and I are not friends. We couldn't be, even if we wanted to. We couldn't be more completely opposite-"

"But Harry is always asking about you," Granger argued. "I mean, really, Ron says he gets sick of it sometimes, how much Harry talks about you. Always wanting to know what you're up to-"

"What I'm *up* to?" Draco echoed in disbelief. It sounded like Slytherins might not be the only ones who suspected Draco of being a dark wizard. "Other than being punched in the face by the Chosen One? Spare me, Granger. It's that I'm his rival. The only one in our year who isn't scared of him or actively licking his boots for being the Boy Who Lived Without a Good Haircut."

Granger actually giggled, before covering her mouth and looking guilty. "Just give them a chance, alright?"

"No promises," Draco said, and was gratified to see Potter and Weasley subsequently disappear from their table. Granted, that meant that on the rare times that the blunderbusses did remember Hogwarts had a library, Granger would invariably be seated at another table with them, but it wasn't as if he missed her. He didn't protest when she called him her friend these days, it was too much work, but he wouldn't personally use a word stronger than study partner, and that would fade in time too. She'd taken up wearing the bracelet he'd given her every day, but why wouldn't she? If it was fit for Narcissa Malfoy, it was more than fit for an 11-year-old Gryffindor.

Potter did make one more half-hearted overture towards him after the next Potions class, enabled by Granger's insistence on being there to put away their remaining ingredients after class, and taking longer at it than she should. By the time they made it back to the classroom, it was deserted save a fidgeting Potter, whose cringing face looked like in fourth year in the courtyard cringingly trying to ask girls to the Yule Ball. And then Granger moved more quickly than he had thought her capable, grabbing a bag she had already packed without him noticing and hightailing it out of there to leave him alone, packing his own bag with just Potter there by his side.

"Um, hi, Draco," Potter said gingerly, "You, uh, you and Hermione's potion, er, you looked great today." It seemed friendship with Granger meant he was *Draco* instead of *Malfoy* again. Potter seemed to be trying hard to seem casual, as if he had just happened to be here, and he and his friends hadn't set this up for him to get Draco alone, which Draco usually avoided at all costs. He didn't think they'd been fully alone like this since that very first meeting, unless one counted hurtling through the air during that first flying lesson. "You know, Seamus heard some of the Slytherins, even older years, think *you* let the troll out into the dungeons?"

Draco fastened a sneer onto his face and wished he had carried fewer books with him. He tried not to pick fights these days, especially with Potter. Any fight against Potter, he was bound to lose. But if someone came after him, he would come back twice as hard. "Are you asking if I'm guilty, Potter, or just sharing your suspicions and expecting me to be stabbed in the heart at your lack of faith in me?"

"No!" Potter exclaimed, and leaned closer to show his earnestness. "No, I, er, thought it was funny, so- listen, Gryffindor is playing Slytherin, and I've been made Gryffindor Seeker..."

Was there no end to the time these Gryffindors wasted in unnecessary blathering? "I had no idea, Potter. You've shocked me with this completely new information."

It would have been gratifying making Potter look so nervous, if Draco hadn't been a thousand times more nervous inside, with so many secrets he could give away in Potter's presence if he slipped- more towards Potter than anyone.

"No, I mean, I guess I was just wondering if you would be at the match?"

Draco had planned to be, but his instinct was to be contrary. "Oh, I haven't decided. It would be a hassle to rearrange my study schedule, which I take very seriously because I'm going to

be an Unspeakable, so..."

"Yeah, Hermione says, but, I guess- I just- I wouldn't have been on the team if you hadn't-"

"I do seem to recall that incident, Potter. You challenged me to a duel over it."

Potter had never looked this hapless and out-of-sorts, even trying to deal with girls. "No, but... you like Quidditch, don't you? I heard you tell Hermione you were really good once, and when we were playing, you seemed good- I wish we could play together again, but I know first-years aren't allowed to have brooms or play Quidditch, so we couldn't, but-"

Irritation surged up, enough to make him throw his last book into his bag far harder than necessary. "What do you want, then? Just to rub it in, that you're the youngest Seeker in a century and you're so much better than me at everything?"

"No, I didn't," Potter said helplessly, only for the best voice in the world to silkily interrupt,

"Draco, is Mr. Potter here bothering you?" Severus had come back into the classroom. Draco knew his schedule well enough to remember the prep he would be starting, a second-year class with Slytherin and someone else, that began rather soon. Severus would need them out of the way, even if they hadn't also happened to be his favorite and least favorite student, perhaps both in the entirety of Hogwarts. At least, Draco liked to tell himself being Severus's godson gave him that privilege. And Severus had been taking the time to teach him some things during his detention brewing sessions, so he must like Draco a little. Even though Draco had robbed him.

"It's fine, sir," Draco said, mortified to be caught fraternizing with a boy Severus disliked so much, and rushed to flee the scene of the crime, only to see the stare Potter was giving Severus. It was one that didn't belong to this young Potter, and one far more resentful than just interrupting his conversation warranted. Draco was reminded of the suspicions Granger had voiced about Severus, and could tell their probable source from that look.

"A word, Mr. Potter," Severus intoned, forestalling Potter's attempt to follow Draco. And Draco found himself standing outside Potions, waiting for Potter to come out like a simpering fanboy, until the realization Potter probably just wanted to talk about how evil he thought Draco's godfather was made his Malfoy pride send him stomping away.

Malfoy pride kept him from the Gryffindor-Slytherin match, though the distance the other Slytherin first-years had been keeping broke down from shock he wasn't coming. "But Draco," Pansy said, with a look more frightened than when he joked about siccing 'the Malfoy family troll' on her, "You love Quidditch. You used to talk all the time about how you couldn't wait for Quidditch at Hogwarts."

Draco shrugged. "Perhaps I've matured," he said loftily, and did not earn impressed looks, or even more of the intimidation he was beginning to take as a sufficient substitute, just disbelief. Theo in particular was looking at him like-

Like someone else had taken over Draco's body and he didn't know who this was inside it.

It wouldn't have been the worst deduction.

He dedicated the length of the game to studying in the library, finishing off every essay he had due before Christmas, including ones he hadn't yet technically been assigned in this timeline. He couldn't believe how empty the library was- you'd at least have thought there'd be some Ravenclaws poking about- which added to a surreal sense of isolation, traveled again in time without knowing but to a future where Hogwarts was a preserved ghost town, the only being alive in the world himself- not a ghost town, though, because even the Hogwarts ghosts were gone.

He had the self-defeating satisfaction of not having gratified Potter by witnessing his victory, not that Potter would have noticed his absence. He thought he had dodged the Chosen One's piss-poor attempts at conversation, until the same night of the match. He was in bed, alternating between playing aimlessly with Imoogi and staring aimlessly at his notes on McGonagall's diagram, when Blaise's voice sounded from outside his cocoon. "Draco, if you're in there and you're not dead, you have a visitor. If a Gryffindor counts as one."

He heaved a sigh and picked his way grumpily out of bed, ignoring the glares he earned in his trudge through the common room to meet Granger. He wouldn't have thought she'd have the nerve to demand him at the dungeons, so that amused him in itself, and he expected she had a more interesting reason to visit than to regale him with tales of Potter's Quidditch prowess.

Except when Draco tapped his wand to open the bare stone entrance, the face there was a different Gryffindor's. No wonder the common room had seemed so disgruntled, when the intruder waiting at the entrance to brag of Potter's Quidditch prowess was Potter himself. He was still in his Quidditch robes, even, the bright scarlet and gold collar and crest making him stand out like Fiendfyre against the muted dungeon stone and green-and-silver. "Potter," Draco hissed in abject mortification, "What in Salazar's name do you think you're doing here?" He had no choice but to step through and hurriedly wave the entrance shut with his wand behind him, knowing Slytherin well enough to be sure that consorting with Harry Potter right after he beat them at Quidditch would be more insidious in their eyes than if he really had let out a troll in their dungeons.

"I need to talk to you about the Quidditch match," Potter said, confirming Draco's worst suspicions, "I have so much to tell you," and Draco fumed.

"Enough to get me in trouble with every Slytherin at Hogwarts showing up here? Yes, you caught the Snitch in your teeth with a bucking broom, congratulations, Potter, you are truly the most awe-inspiring wizard of all time," Draco dead-panned. "There, is that enough? Can you go accept the rest of your law-mandated adoration from everyone else now?"

"I- oh, you heard about that?" Potter asked bashfully, rubbing the back of his head in some poor attempt at looking humble. "No, Draco, that's not what I meant. I have so much to tell you. Listen, it's about why my broom went out of control. We need your help."

Draco had that image within the blue loop- Potter nearly falling off his broom, along with his crestfallenness Potter managed not to fall to his death *or* lose the match. "What, it was jinxed?"

"That's what Ron and Hermione said," Potter said, lowering his voice as if Draco was some fitting confidential confidant for the Chosen One. Maybe he was tired of only having one brain to share between three Gryffindors. "They saw it being cursed, even though Hagrid said it was rubbish a teacher would do that, but they *saw*, and Snape would have killed me if Hermione hadn't stopped him, because he's after what that dog is guarding in that room and we got Hogwarts to say the package has to do with the headmaster and someone called Nicholas Flamel-"

"Snape," Draco interrupted, a cold fury crawling up through his chest that made the figure Potter cut in his Quidditch robes look an ugliness before him as twisted and wrong as the Dark Lord. "You think Snape was the one jinxing you trying to kill you."

"Hermione *saw*!" Potter exclaimed, as if this should make it incontrovertible fact. "So we know he's up to something now, and he's your Head of House and he trusts you, so maybe you could try and watch him and see what he's up to, and find out why he's after me and-"

"You're here," Draco interrupted, hand tightening on the wand at his side, "Because you want me to spy on Professor Snape for you?"

"Draco, he *did* to try to kill me," Potter insisted, and Draco was ready to consider using some of Severus's own spells to *actually* try to kill Potter and show him what that looked like.

"Are you sure it was him and not another teacher?" Draco hissed, trying to be calm and not attempt the life of the Boy Who Lived right at the threshold of Slytherin. "If it was just coming from that *direction*, who says it couldn't have been any other professor- that Quirrell, he's so quiet and nervous, there's definitely something wrong with him-"

After Draco had been incensed into potentially giving away secret knowledge of the past, the least Potter could do was *listen* to those misguided disclosures. "They saw Snape muttering, and he was in the corridors near the dog on Halloween, and he's always hated me for no reason, and when I looked at him the first time, my scar hurt, and Draco, he was at school with your father, wasn't he? You said yourself that your father was involved with Voldemort, and they were in Slytherin together. Ron and I think Snape might have been a follower of his too, though Hermione says that's going too far- Draco, do you know? Was Snape a Death Eater?"

Draco could have pointed out Father had only been at Hogwarts for the first year Severus was, or lying and saying that as Severus's godson, no one would know better than him that his godfather hadn't been a Death Eater. But he had the sick feeling that admitting that connection to Severus would make Potter think Severus too mixed up with Malfoys to be innocent. It wasn't like Potter would be wrong.

Potter seemed to take Draco's stricken silence as an admission. "If he was, Draco, like your father used to be, then I don't think he's changed. If he followed Voldemort before... Ron's father says, once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater. People that evil don't change." Then Potter seemed to misinterpret Draco's silence. "Don't worry, we're not accusing *you* of anything. I know you're not like that just because of who your family is. You're different from your father. I know you're not a Death Eater-"

Draco raised his wand. "Get out of my sight." Potter looked stunned, so Draco jabbed the bent end right into Potter's forehead, where his hair had fallen out of place to expose that famous scar. He thought he imagined a sizzling sound at the contact. "There? Does that make your bloody scar hurt, Potter? Get out of the dungeons now, and leave me alone unless you want to see what I *really* could have done to you in that duel!"

Potter didn't flee. Either Draco wasn't intimidating after all, or Gryffindor foolishness was keeping him there regardless, staring him in the eye until Draco was the one to flee, not caring about Potter hearing the Slytherin password. "Snakewood!" Draco barked, charging without a look back, and sprinted through the common room not caring what any of them thought of his flight. He pushed past Vince and Greg, who saw his face and hurried out of the dorms at once, and flung himself into bed, spelled the curtains closed and quiet, and grabbed Imoogi before he began to shake, not crying but panting, with all the panic dry and scraping, breathless and beyond control. He threw his wand beside his pillow where it stayed when he slept, which gave off the illusion it was trembling too.

Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater. Even if a trick had gotten the Mark off you, you were still marked. Once and always and forever a Death Eater.

If Draco had thought a respiratory fit would be the worst to come of that meaningless Quidditch match, he was wrong. Everything was normal the next morning in the first-year dorms the next morning, if you didn't count the others giving him a wide berth, but that was normal after the troll incident. When he arrived at breakfast and found himself getting a wider berth and more stares than usual, he just assumed rumors of a scene with Potter had spread. It wasn't until Granger didn't show up at the library all day, and the number of people staring and whispering around him kept up in the library as well as through both meals, that Draco began to suspect something. He only understood, though, when he went back to the dormitory after dinner and found the other boys completely absent. He found them in the common room, clustered together at the fireplace looking flattered to be questioned by a number of older Slytherins, mostly boys.

"Is it true about Malfoy?" fourth-year Peregrine Derrick was eagerly asking Theo. "What the Gryffindors are saying about him? Did he ever try anything with you?"

Theo just shrugged uncomfortably, and Draco was gratified by that bit of unexpected loyalty in an otherwise nightmarish moment, until he remembered he never *had* done anything remotely sexual towards Theo until years later.

"I don't know," Blaise was saying, "Can we really believe a bunch of Gryffindors," and Marcus Flint was the one to lean back on his sofa like a jade throne and laugh,

"Well, they're saying he told them himself that he's queer. First-year and already trying to get it in like that? Twisted. Guess he was trying to have it on with one of them. Maybe Potter, huh?"

"What do you think that visit last night was, then?" Miles Bletchley speculated, over the sounds of most of the common room's shrieks of laughter and disgust. "Lover's quarrel?"

"Probably just Potter telling Malfoy to leave him alone," sniggered Flint, and Draco wished that no one would notice as he stalked past them. But he knew everyone had.

At least no one called after him or jeered. If anything, a hushed silence was all he heard follow him. Inspiring fear came with more advantages than he had known.

He was seized with the spiteful urge to rush back in and yell, "I'm going to set the Malfoy troll on all of you!" But his steps sped and turned to a run, which he thought was towards Gryffindor Tower. He could see it in his head, making his own visit to their common room, demanding entry and trying to blast his way in if necessary. Granger would come to meet him and tell him who it had been, Potter, or Weasley, because he already knew it hadn't been her. For the worst moment almost since he had gone through that mirror, worse than his father's cane to his back in front of a line of floating marble house elf eyes, worse than any of his breathing fits, worse than the moment McGonagall told him about the loop, he had thought it was Granger who told on him. That she'd heard of his refusal to help against Severus, and spread it around in revenge.

And then Draco remembered he'd blurted out he was gay to Potter and Weasley in a rage-induced moment of stupidity. Could he have acted any less like a Slytherin? It gave him a surge of relief, before a rage blinding enough to want to cast Sectumsempra at the next thing, dead or living, that dared to touch him.

He ended up breaking into the Quidditch shed, a simple Alohomora sufficing, and taking one of the school brooms. He would likely end up with a number more detentions if he was caught out at night, let alone as a first-year flying without permission, detentions far less pleasant than free Potions tutoring. But the realization it was Sunday night and for once no one would be using the pitch was enough to make the prospect irresistible, the closest to going somewhere away from here. Anywhere but where he had to face the prospect of having screwed up his life worse than he ever managed back in first year, ruined it by, of all the surmounting follies he had ever thought himself capable of, trusting Gryffindors. Trusting *Potter*.

The thought of storming to Gryffindor to confront Potter kept recurring, so Draco kept flying higher and faster, pushing the school broom to capacity with this small body so light the speed streamlined almost all his frame to the broom itself, making it like he was a single hurtling particle, he and the broom one being in flight, trying to outrun something. But once he traced the pitch around a dozen times, the sting of the night air pelting against his face became more painful than exhilarating, and after all, there was nothing he was actually running from.

Except Potter calling his name.

Draco was so startled he could barely keep hold of his broom for a moment. The act of quickly slowing near the hoops was almost deadly, combined with being startled by a voice that couldn't have been more unmistakable, or more unwanted, cutting through the darkening dusk and whipping wind. He pretended he hadn't heard, drifting to trace lazier loops around the three hoops, as if there was some meaning to the repeated sequence other than threatening to make himself dizzy. He assumed Potter had found him and come to speak with him,

presumably about the information that had gotten out- if this was another recruitment call for spying on Snape, it wasn't a question of *whether* an Unforgivable got used, but which one.

And Draco could hope that Potter was about to deliver abject begging apologies with a story that cast the blame completely on the Weasel, but even if it did, even if Potter had nothing to do with it- Potter was the one he'd rejected at the Slytherin entrance last night, and Draco didn't believe in timing that perfect to be a coincidence. Weasley was Potter's best friend, and Potter was accountable for his actions. Not just in the more general sense, but here, in that Potter would have been the one to tell Weasley of their fight, and incense him against Draco to inspire that kind of revenge-

"Draco!" Potter kept shouting, until finally stomping away, and Draco's overwhelming relief was mixed with a slight degradation in his self-estimation that whatever Potter had to say, it was worth giving up so easily. He would have liked, he found, for Potter to have kept trying, so Draco could have the satisfaction of ignoring him for longer. It was cold up here without moving at a breakneck pace, so he cast a half-hearted Focillo to warm himself, which from this damn wand of his of course meant it practically felt like dragonfire, but at least he wasn't about to be frozen.

He resumed his loops at a lazier pace, even closing his eyes for a few dangerous moments, only to have them forced open by a much closer call of, "Draco, listen!" And he had left the broomshed open, hadn't he? There was Potter, dressed unseasonably for the Quidditch pitch at night, though at least he had a Gryffindor scarf on, attesting to more planning than Draco put into things. Potter flew up to hover before him with a face that Draco had learned to read even better than envy had taught the first time around, a mix of trepidation and guilt. For an insane moment, Draco's instincts said to cast another warming charm for Potter, up in the wind because Draco had ignored him. But the charm was a first-year one. Potter could shiver up here or bloody well do it himself.

"Draco, will you come down to talk?" Potter yelled.

"What," Draco said tightly, "Could you possibly say to me down there that you can't say up here? You shouldn't be outside at night like this without official business either, Potter. You could be expelled, you know. Back to the *Muggles*."

"We've been looking for you since dinner, Draco," Potter called back, with what sounded like real concern, and if Draco got one hint of what could turn out to be pity- "We checked everywhere else and couldn't find you-" *Please, please tell me they didn't go to the Slytherin dungeons*- "Not even in the Slytherin common room-" *They went to the Slytherin dungeons.* "Hermione thought you might be out here, she said you used to play Quidditch or go flying at night at home. So I said I would check and if I couldn't find you, we could go back and tell the professors you were missing, though she wanted to already. Draco, you should come in with me. Even with your father, it's not like you couldn't be expelled either-"

"Lovely," Draco called. "After the events of today, expulsion would be ideal. Now can you leave me alone? Do you imagine you're *not* the last person I would wish to speak to ever again?"

"I'm sorry!" Potter yelled, flying up to lean against one hoop with Draco between another, leaving them less than a meter apart. Even distressed and struggling for words, it was impossible to miss how Potter flew as naturally as walking or breathing, which just made him more despicable. "When we heard the rumor had spread, we were shocked. And maybe I should have gone to tell you right away, but I had to figure out how it happened- Draco, we didn't let out that you were like that on purpose, it just-"

"'We'," Draco quoted icily, and enjoyed watching an icy gust of November wind make Potter shiver in his hoop. "'We', 'we', 'we'. Who is this 'we', Potter, who 'didn't mean to' tell the school I'm a *queer*?"

He instinctively drew his wand at the sight of Potter's dismay then. Potter's broom toppled sideways where it was braced on the metal hoop, before he managed to right himself. Draco had shocked Potter so much more than he had expected, it almost boggled the mind, until he remembered Potter was only 11. Draco's talon wand seemed to stick clinging to his palm, something in willing him to cast something to make Potter really plummet down.

"I'm not going to fall." Potter drew up his shoulders, as if determined to be brave where he had not been wise, but Draco was certain of his culpability.

"You exposed me to the school," Draco said steadily, "Told everyone about what I am, because I yelled at you. Because I wouldn't come to your stupid Quidditch game or play along with your stupid vendetta against Professor Snape, which you're wrong about, I stake my life a thousand times you're wrong, and no one else stands up to you, do they, and you can't have that, so you decided to put the Death Eater back in his place-

"No! Listen, Ron and I were talking about it last night, about you, in the Gryffindor dorm, and it turns out we were overheard. By *accident*. We didn't realize. And I guess word just spread..."

Not malice but incompetence. Delightful. "Overheard by *who*, Potter?"

"Seamus heard us," Potter admitted, "But I don't think he meant for it to get around or cause trouble for you, and Draco, you don't need to be ashamed. There's nothing wrong with-"

"Do you think the problem is that I'm *ashamed* to be what I am?" Draco asked disbelievingly, keeping his wand in his hand where he could tell it made Potter nervous enough to be a solace to him. "Do you think it hurts my *feelings*? That I'm just worried about being teased or an outcast? Newsflash, Potter, no one's going to mess with me, because they think I can send a troll after them, and as for being an outcast, I don't have any friends anyway! Do you think I care what any of you *children* think of me, that I care for your petty approval? I'm a pureblood, Potter. I'm a Malfoy! Just because you don't know what that means, doesn't mean it doesn't matter- if you knew anything about how *my* world works, what the consequences of this will be for me-"

"Then please," Potter said, voice going unbelievably desperate, as his eyes finally went from Draco's wand to his face again, as if less afraid of being hexed than being misunderstood. "Explain it to me, Draco, please. I'm not trying to be a bad person to you. I want to help you-"

"I'd rather have you dead," Draco said in a voice more his father's than his own, "Than pitying me," and took off to wherever was as far away from Harry Potter as he could get.

He escaped any further dialogue with a living soul the next day, except if you counted his father. Draco had been all set to breakfast with the house elves, but that Malfoy pride had disastrously guided him to show his face and hold his head high, show that whatever anyone said of him, he was still better than all of them. That resolve lasted only as long as it took for the scarlet letter, a flash of Gryffindor red that instinctively caught every eye at the Slytherin table.

Draco knew what it was, and immediately seized upon it with the instinct to carry it from the Great Hall before opening it, but he pulled too hard and the seal affixing the letter came off. He wasn't even surprised that it was his father's voice yelling, while laughter tittered around the entire hall and children nudged each other at his expense. He just couldn't believe his father would do this so publicly, if only in the name of the Malfoy family name, but he must have thought it would tarnish their name more for him not to make a public show of disapproval. And make it he did, with the blast of air and noise he made as high the darkness had come from his wand at Ollivander's.

"DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY! YOU ARE A MALFOY, YOU ARE A BLACK, YOU ARE A PUREBLOOD OF THE SACRED TWENTY EIGHT, HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN, HAVE YOU NO REGARD FOR THE NAME YOU CARRY-"

The letter bellowed his name before hopping into the air and forming an impressive facsimile of lips and tongue and teeth. It would have made an eye-catching picture even if Father's tenor voice hadn't been rattling every plate in the hall except for at Gryffindor.

"...FOR THE BLOOD OF SALAZAR SLYTHERIN THAT RUNS THROUGH YOUR VEINS-"

Draco had been tensed for the worst, every muscle in his body tight with painful expectation, but he could barely hold back an eye-roll at that. That often came out around now, Father's patently false claims they were direct descendents of Salazar.

"...FOR THE HEIR OF MALFOY MANOR TO BEHAVE SO UNNATURALLY, CONSORTING WITH MUDBLOODS AND CHASING DISGUSTING PERVERSIONS, WERE YOUR MOTHER ANOTHER WOMAN, I WOULD QUESTION IF YOU WERE MY SON AND NOT A HALF-BLOOD BASTARD-"

And that made Draco flinch. He was really 18, not 11, and he would be damned if these children would see him squirm. But it was an effort to sit and listen without screaming back against the Howler, as if it was his father there to argue against. He regretted not telling his father exactly what he thought of him the day he returned to his old body, or the day he found out about Aunt Bella's wand, or the day he killed the snake. He regretted not telling his father that he knew, however much power Father thought he had, however much he blustered and terrorized his son- unnatural or not, bastard or not, Draco knew Lucius Malfoy as now and forever a coward.

"...WILL NOT SUFFER SUCH FILTH AS YOU TO RETURN UNDER MY ROOF AT THE SACRED WINTER SOLSTICE, TAKE YOUR EXILE TO CONSIDER WHAT YOU OWE YOUR NAME AND YOUR BLOOD, IF YOU HAVE ANY UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT YOU STAND TO LOSE."

Trust Father to describe forbidding his son from coming home for Christmas as an *exile*.

No one tried to speak to Draco, with a hush fallen over the entire Hall. He didn't dare look down his table, or up at the professors, not wanting to see Severus's reaction and certainly not Dumbledore's, but his way out took him inevitably past Gryffindor. His gaze snapped up at the sound of a whisper from the first-years, and met the plain ruddy face of Seamus Finnigan, speaking intently into the ear of Dean Thomas while Granger tried to tell them to be silent...

Draco considered himself well-justified in abandoning all the day's classes, and spent his lunch with the house elves. They were more than happy to listen to his stories about Dobby, which he told in more detail, and many were listening captivated by the end. If Father didn't relish this manner of spreading private Malfoy business, he could suggest Draco instead send a Howler.

It cheered him somewhat to see their big marble eyes light up astonished and proud at his rendition of Dobby's stirring deeds, both in stepping forward to protect Draco and in ensuring he reach his room safely before leaving the manor. Maybe, if word of Dobby as folk hero spread far enough, some variety of elf pressure could be exerted to get him employed here. Draco should have found it impossibly demeaning to speculate on elf politics, but after just three months back at Hogwarts, if he were to be given the choice during a great flood between saving all the students or all the house elves, he couldn't say he wasn't beginning to incline towards the elves.

So he chose not to practice on them as he'd originally considered, but used a series of transfigured dummies. The issue wasn't whether he could perform the curse, but controlling the strength. Eventually, he stopped sending enchanted sandbags flying through the abandoned classroom, though it took a while. And he had to practice a different curse, Sectumsempra, on a few last dummies, watching sand spill out instead of blood, before he felt remotely composed.

After hours perfecting the curse for Finnigan, the rest couldn't have been easier. Draco hid behind one of the pillars in the Transfiguration courtyard, a concealment the size of his 11-year-old body made effortless. Eventually, the Gryffindors emerged from, ironically enough, the temporary classroom for Defense Against the Dark Arts, letting the odor of garlic out into the courtyard. Draco's eyes fastened on Potter, flanked by Weasley and Granger, and felt a flash of temptation, but then his original plan came up behind Potter. Dean Thomas was consoling Draco's target with an arm around his shoulder, but not entwined enough to fear hitting the wrong boy.

"Langlock," Draco whispered, and just as it had on the dummies, the spell hit Finnigan so softly he almost doubted anything had happened. Finnigan kept walking at first, so subtly had it been done in comparison to the duel with Potter, but then he opened his mouth to say something smart to Thomas and got a witless look on his face as no sound came out.

It couldn't have been easier to slip from the ground floor to the Slytherin dungeons.

When Draco found his notebooks, there was no note for November 11, so Draco drew a line under the section about Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, and wrote in large triumphant letters invisible to anyone else: RED LINE: SHOWED FINNIGAN WHAT BECOMES OF TONGUES THAT SPEAK ILL OF DRACO MALFOY.

When Draco showed his face at the next meal, eyes turned to him at once like the pariah he was, but with an important distinction: no one was laughing, nor pitying. Not even the Gryffindors.

Langlock

For the rest of fall term, friendship overtures from Gryffindor were *curtailed* to say the least, as well as from every other house and year. Draco told himself it was a blessing that everyone correctly assumed the curse came from the Malfoy that Finnigan had just told the school was gay. No one could prove anything, though, so there were no formal repercussions. The school *was* talking about Draco, but not whether he was queer, and not about his father's Howler.

The ripple was felt instead in the wider berth granted him, including by the other Slytherin first-years, though Draco couldn't tell how much was fear and how much a practical unwillingness to associate with a potentially disgraced pureblood. Very few had the nerve to openly accuse him, and so a reputation already growing from unsociability, along with an uncanny level of knowledge in classes for a first-year, was polished by a darker tinge. It turned to something that made many of the lower years, and some of the upper ones, act like he was some dark creature stalking the corridors for prey.

The only ones who did face up to him about it came from that group with privileged knowledge about the curse, which consisted of Severus, who'd invented it, and the gaggle of Gryffindors who'd been at the duel with Potter where he cast it. Of the four of which it seemed, bafflingly enough, none could remember the incantation Draco had used. Nor could they go to the professors about it, since that would mean admitting they had been part of an illegal secret duel themselves.

But all five did come to him in the time before Finnigan could speak again. Severus was the first, summoning him from Herbology by means of a disgruntled second-year Ravenclaw. "So..." was all he said at first, giving Draco the chance to unburden himself. When nothing was forthcoming, Severus informed him, "I was summoned this morning to the hospital wing to look in on one Seamus Finnigan. Who has come down with a mysterious inability to speak. Or properly eat. His tongue locked to the top of his mouth. An interesting curse invented by a former Slytherin, and known rather exclusively in Slytherin circles. McGonagall claims the boy had a schoolboy quarrel... of a sort... with yourself. Could it be there is a connection?"

Severus's sarcasm was exquisitely heavy, putting a smile on Draco's face that hardly made Severus happier. "Proud of it, are you? Is this the name you want to make for yourself here? Already drenched in the darkest kind of magic, and yet fallen from favor with your father as well?" Severus's tone dropped as he bent forward with so intense a dark stare it sent all of Draco's shields up. "Are you aware this is a curse, by design, intensely difficult to counteract, except by the caster?" Draco nodded, though he hadn't been. "And that your Head of House forbade talk of your involvement without proof, and declared the curse to be beyond his abilities to identify?" Draco shook his head.

"Thank you, sir. Do you think the professors will find a way to reverse it by themselves?"

"It would be likely. But if they do not, or delay overlong..." Severus's gaze swept over Draco, but again, he felt no attempts at Legilimency pushing at his shields, and that made him feel

he had one ally left in this castle. "Would one expect the hypothetical caster of such a curse, bearing the power of its immediate reversal, to deliver clemency within any reasonable interval, and reverse his handiwork, however... justified?"

Draco smiled wider than in months. "Oh, I don't know," he drawled carelessly. "For someone to earn a curse like that, he must have awfully ran his mouth. But I can imagine this mysterious dark wizard might find it in his heart to help the blabbermouth. Perhaps in time for Christmas. Or perhaps not. It would depend on the individual."

The Gryffindors each came to plead their case, promising so uniformly they would convince Seamus not to say anything that he knew they had colluded. Their pleas were much the same, though Weasley's on Wednesday was more empathetic, surprisingly enough, containing a moving anecdote about the coming out of Weasley's dragontamer brother, Charlie. It did nothing to sway Draco towards helping, but did give an increased appreciation for the Weasley clan. On Thursday, Longbottom delivered his plea like a speech he'd memorized, trembling the whole time they spoke. When Draco smiled and offered to take a look at his Potions essay for him, he turned the color of one of his less successful potions, mumbled something about Bubotuber pus, and fled at a pelter that got him detention from Madam Pince.

They were both more effective than Granger. Her rambling attempt earlier on Tuesday to convince him to spare Finnigan was so clogged with qualifications, and acknowledgment of Finnigan's wrongness spreading the rumor, that it left him more sure if anything of his own righteousness. And while she spoke to him at a minimum throughout Finnigan's silent languishing, she did continue to occupy their study table, however unhappy it must have made her fellow Gryffindors. He could imagine her thought process with amusing clarity: *Oh, yes, it's very sad about Seamus, but it can't be allowed to interfere with my* Potions *marks.* And when Draco poked at the charm on her bracelet, offering to explain the yantra and the duality behind the goddess Kali, she barely lasted half a day before caving in and demanding the answer.

The most certain was Potter, after telling Draco the night before that the culprit was Finnigan. He must have come to regret that by now. Draco was surprised Potter waited so long, but when he did, he at least had the cleverness to set it in a private location, as if to beat the answers out of Draco. He waited for Draco to finish his illicit Sunday night flight around the Quidditch pitch before cornering him in the broomshed.

"It'll have been a week tomorrow since Seamus stopped talking. Isn't that long enough?"

Draco faced Potter with the determination to do the same as with the others, and neither confirm nor deny, as calm and beatific as some mindfulness deity. Granted, when he'd pictured this, he hadn't been trapped with Potter in so small a space, nor for Potter to touch him, brushing Draco's hand away to wrench the school broom from him and shove it on a rack. Draco rubbed the back of his hand with exaggerated woundedness, tossing his head haughtily in the face of this uncouth barbarian, and said with a smirk, "Is that meant to be a philosophical question?"

Potter took a deep breath, the pupils in his pretty eyes growing as they focused on Draco from up this close. "Draco? I said, Draco, do you think I'm stupid?"

Why did these children insist on setting themselves up and expecting him not to take the bait? "Well, that would be less of a philosophical debate," Draco laughed, leaning against one of the broom racks and resting his cheek against his hand. "I suspect there's only one clear answer to your second question." Another deep breath in and out, as if mastering the desire to rip Draco limb from limb was an effort for Potter on par with facing the Dark Lord. "What, Potter, have you cornered me like this to beat it out of me? Since you could never-"

"Is that what you want?" Potter said, and pushed Draco against the coarse wooden wall. *Merlin, he's gotten bigger and taller since Ollivander's, hasn't he?* "Of course I'm not going to *hit* you, Draco, I told you how sorry I was about that- and I know it's my fault too for telling you about Seamus that it happened. I thought after all you said about trying to do the right thing, you meant it- but I get it. He shouldn't have told people. Ron and I shouldn't have let it slip. But haven't you made your point? It's been long enough. Seamus doesn't deserve-"

But you said it, Potter. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater.

"Don't tell me," Draco hissed out without thinking, "What Finnigan deserves," and lifted his chin defiantly.

Potter's face twisted, some presentiment of the boy who would cast Sectumsempra on him appearing under the baby fat and cuteness. "Is this how far you'll go, Draco, when your Death Eater father is mad at you?"

"You don't have anywhere to go for Christmas either," Draco snapped, only to regret the words- it was only the 17th of November, weeks before sign-up to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas, but it seemed a safe enough assumption for Potter to merely resent Draco's retort, rather than question it. Salazar, he remembered taunting Potter about having nowhere to go at Christmas this first year, about being unwanted. How the tables turned. "Do you?"

Draco thought Potter would hit him, and felt a rush through his blood weighted disturbingly heavily with anticipation over dread, but the hand Potter raised fell against the shed wall, befitting Potter's conflicted face. "You know nothing about me, Draco."

"And what makes you think," Draco whispered, willing Potter to go ahead and hit him if he was going to stay this close, "What could ever make you think you know anything about me either?"

"I saw you in Ollivander's. Saw you crying. I know you're not who you're pretending to be."

"And who is that supposed to be?" Draco sneered, only for the sneer to fall away, along with just about every defense his mind and body and self had built up in 18 years when Potter said,

"You're not your father."

Potter must have seen the way the words hit him. He didn't back a step away, though, just kept their gazes locked, as close as at their duel, close enough that Potter's pupils were almost entirely black. "Draco?" went Potter, but Potter might as well have been the one to cast Langlock.

Draco shoved Potter back and ran. When he heard Potter calling after him, he ignored it.

The next morning, Dumbledore announced at breakfast that Professor Snape had found a potion to reverse Seamus Finnigan's condition, and he was expected to make a full recovery. Beneath his irritation at the Gryffindor cheers, Draco was relieved. Not that he let anyone see it.

Finnigan was back in time for Christmas, and his refusal to so much as look Draco in the eye was a definite bonus. As was the way Finnigan seemed to have outpaced Longbottom and Potter to become at once, fully and unequivocally, Severus Snape's least favorite student.

Draco had been prepared to threaten Potter and Weasley with a Langlock curse of their own, should they use their own tongues to speak of him, let alone *to* him anymore. But they gave him such a wide berth he would have thought he was radioactive. He wanted to ask Granger if Potter ever talked about him, but reminded himself he was not actually 11 years old.

When Severus came around with the list for students staying, Draco didn't even know why he bothered asking Draco. Father had ensured the whole school knew Draco wasn't welcome home, and no message had arrived from Mother to offer anything in contradiction. He took her silence as a cue and gave the Howler no reply. It was one of the longest conversations he'd had in weeks, other than with Severus and Granger, when Theo came to the dorm to let him know Severus was in the common room taking names. "Um, Draco, you aren't going home for Christmas, are you? Professor Snape is making the list, so..."

"He knows to put me down," Draco called out lazily, tossing his wand up and down in the air as he fantasized about enchanting mistletoe to trap Finnigan with Moaning Myrtle. He didn't expect *Myrtle* would mind, that boy-crazy bint. "Theo, do you know if mistletoe works on ghosts?"

"What?" went Theo, and he had definitely used to be more fun. "Draco, I don't know, but Professor Snape says anyone who wants to be on the list has to come out and tell him now, so..."

Draco let out a hearty sigh and unlocked his curtains, stalking out in pajamas to face a common room full of knowing eyes. Severus was there before the snake fireplace, parchment and quill in hand, and watched Draco stalk up with a look of slight amusement. "Really?" was all Draco hissed, before taking the quill and writing *Draco Malfoy* large enough to take up half the page, not that there were many other names. A soft cough sounded which Draco mistook for laughter, and he whirled in the direction of the offending sound. "What?" he barked, and it was Marcus Flint. He was startled to see even Flint jump to his feet off his customary throne, lifting his hands in the air and stammering apologies. For *coughing*.

When Draco looked at Severus, the amusement on his face had gone more than slight. "I *have* heard rumors," Severus said silkily, "Of a Malfoy family troll, Draco. Do be sure, when left alone to roam the dungeons with your troll at Christmas, to feed the beast strictly *Gryffindors*."

December proved a quieter month than those preceding, settling into a wary but sustained rhythm of classes, meals, sleep, studying with Granger, Potions lessons with Severus, and

studying alone, with the only break in these regular occupations the night flights he had still yet to be caught for on Sunday nights, and the if anything-increasing need to stay away from Potter, which sent him throwing himself hurriedly around corners and behind statues to avoid being seen by Potter and friends. Once or twice, Granger caught sight of him stealing away, and gave him severe looks, particularly one time in the Astronomy courtyard ducking behind a dilapidated bit of shrubbery. "Why are you so scared of Harry?" she asked him once, "He's not scared of you," before the icy reserve of Draco's non-reaction cautioned her against further discourse on the topic.

Potter was harder to avoid once most of the school went home, a disconcertingly new experience for once since, after all, Draco had never been forced to stay over the winter break before. Just one more marker of how he'd intended to do things better or keep them the same, and he'd generally just managed to make things worse. But Weasley was there, which he hadn't remembered, so that kept Potter occupied. The Weasley twins were there as well, to ensure things were never quiet, and Draco never stopped having to try and figure out which one would be dead in six years. In contrast, Draco found his empty table unexpectedly disconcerting, though he thrust aside the ridiculous idea as soon as it came to his head- imagine him, Draco Malfoy, missing *Granger*!

At least Severus was here, not that he had ever seemed to have anywhere but Hogwarts to come home to. If Draco could have had his way, he would have spent most all his hours not in the library or the Quidditch pitch with Severus in the Potions dungeons and Severus's suite of rooms. He'd have been happy to follow behind and observe, or sit with him and study, if Severus would have had him. But Severus wouldn't most of the time, barking about the inconvenience of small children, always underfoot like house elves who'd slammed their head into the ovens too many times, so Draco spent most of break alone. The only real exceptions were at meals, the actual Christmas Day, and Potter's rare attempts to speak to him.

On the day Hagrid finished decorating the Great Hall for Christmas, Draco felt compelled to sit and stare at all the holly and mistletoe and lights. Even if it didn't hold a candle to the silvery way Malfoy Manor turned out on Christmas Eve, especially on years Father held his exclusive heart-of-winter gala at the Manor. But there had been no gala after fourth year, and last Christmas had received no decoration at all, unless one counted the basic stringing of lights done by some brave house elves, and the festive trappings and trimmings of bodies hanging from trees in place of icicles. The only one to so much as acknowledge it had been Christmas on the day had been a jubilant Aunt Bella, who had also inserted herself at Malfoy Manor beside her speechless sister on another morbid Christmas in sixth year, when her presence had replaced Father's. Draco had thought it a threat, a reminder he was being watched, and that consequences would follow should he fail to complete his mission against Dumbledore. But the next year proved Aunt Bella just really loved Christmas.

And she might have liked this sight before her during her own years at Hogwarts. There was something compelling in this uncomplicated finery, twelve whole trees in the Great Hall and not a body on one of them. Though even as a student, Aunt Bella might have been dreaming of adding bodies in between tinsel and pine cones...

It was embarrassing to be caught sitting there admiring the decorations like some bloody first-year, though, and by Potter no less. Potter crossed the Great Hall on the night of Christmas Eve, only to start at the sight of a body at the table, whose bright hair gave away Draco's identity. These green eyes were one of the few pairs that, as Granger said, seemed unafraid to betray they had registered the presence of a Malfoy.

"Um, hello, Draco," Potter called, raising a hand before coming over to the table. "Happy Christmas Eve. Er, what are you thinking about?"

Draco turned to look at the candlelight across Potter's face, the festive lights silhouetting him as night fell deeper behind the windows. "I don't know," he said, and had to search for a comeback with effort, remembering the last real words Potter had spoken to him ago: *I know you're not your father.* "The effectiveness of basic incendiary charms on different species of Christmas trees?"

Either Potter didn't know what incendiary meant, or he still didn't take Draco seriously. "The trees are beautiful, aren't they?" he said with a smile, and called "Happy Christmas Eve" again, before giving Draco a little nod and scurrying towards the doors. He executed this maneuver with a carelessness showing disturbingly little fear Draco might hex him in the back.

Christmas morning was an especially cold one in the dungeons, without a sight of the two other Slytherins from third and sixth year who'd stayed. His only encounter with them was on that morning, as the three went obediently to Snape's undecorated chambers for a brief joyless Slytherin celebration. That consisted of taking seats before the fire and listening to Severus's atonal rendition of a tale that demonstrated Salazar Slytherin's famous abhorrence of the Yuletide. Its climax of the Great Hall filled to the rafters in real snow, impervious to physical or magical removal, was one that had Draco covering his mouth with laughter. He'd heard Severus deliver this fable on the handful of Christmases he had stopped in at the Manor, never invited to the gala but delivering presents to Draco and Mother and accepting a strong beverage by Mother's fire. It was something of a tradition for Draco to demand it, but he'd never thought he'd hear it again.

Then all three were handed slender turquoise vials of Draught of Peace with a silver ribbon on each, and unceremoniously shooed towards the door. The other two left without Draco having learned the boy or girl's names, not that they showed any indication of wanting to give them. Draco lingered as Severus had surely known he would, until Severus beckoned him back to the fire. "Did you receive any other presents? They would have been at the foot of your bed." Draco shook his head, trying to hide how it stung. He had spent a not-inconsiderable amount of time carving a second charm for Granger's bracelet. This one was an imitation of another from his mother's bracelet, a Celtic St. Brigid's cross. But he hadn't gotten anything back from her at all.

Maybe his recent cursing activities precluded him from such generosity. But if there was one thing Aunt Bella had taught him, other than the need for strong Occlumency shields and the general futility of the human condition, it was that even dark wizards needed Christmas presents.

"Take this," Severus said, and held out some papers.

Draco leapt for it, and let out a very first-year-sounding whoop when he read the first one: a pass to the Restricted Section. The second sheet had more detailed specifications. "Five books," Severus cautioned. "No more. All five *pertaining to time travel*. You will send a list of their titles upon borrowing, and if any have no relation to the subject, or you abuse this privilege elsewise, you will not only never set foot in the Restricted Section again, you will lose any *dream* of Potions lessons beyond those mandated in the terms of my employment. Are we in agreement?"

"Yes!" Draco cried excitedly, and ran forward and nearly flung his arms around Severus in his armchair before stopping himself out of self-preservation, and just bouncing gleefully in front of Severus instead. "Thank you, sir! Happy Christmas, sir!"

Dared he think that the ghost of a smile on Severus's face? "Off with you. And if you make me regret this, you will regret it more."

"Yes, sir!" Draco exclaimed, and repressed his urge to race out of Severus's chambers towards the library. Once he was out, he let himself run. By the time he made it up a few floors, though, he had remembered the library was closed on Christmas Day. No fewer than three different professors had seen fit to remind Draco of that. And besides, after what he'd learned from McGonagall, there wasn't much point in researching anymore. But he might find something useful in another way, in a book with enough tangential relation to satisfy Severus, and besides, maybe more advanced research would prove McGonagall wrong. But either way, he had to wait.

He was late for Christmas dinner, and by the time he made it to the Great Hall, he was dismayed to find it a grotesquely grandiose affair, with the excessiveness of the number of turkeys covering the single long table only surpassed by the excess of wizard crackers strewn throughout, of which the Weasleys were making full and obnoxious use. Draco stared enviously up at the High Table with its lavish allotment of wine, though a mortally plastered Hagrid was only slightly less horrifying than Dumbledore in a flowered bonnet. *Immortal,* Draco thought as he watched the teachers and then students, picking at the turkey and ignoring his Christmas pudding. He might as well have been watching a scene in a Pensieve. *They all think they're immortal.*

Dumbledore's laughter rocketed down from the High Table, and the laughter of the Weasley twins joined it painfully from the other side of him. Such a grand time they and Potter seemed to be having with the cheap little wizard crackers, which Draco hadn't needed anyone's teaching to know were for peasants. The Great Hall grew less and less great as the dinner went on, Hagrid trying to kiss McGonagall and making Draco's vision fill with the image of Hagrid led into the Hogwarts courtyard carrying the dead-looking body of Harry Potter. So he looked in the other direction, and he still could not decipher which of the twins congratulating Potter on his new wizard's chess set was the one that Draco's fellow Death Eaters were going to kill.

He had gotten used to the presence of the dead around him, to the point he could even look Vince in the eye without smelling anything burning most of the time. But so much noxious happiness in the air was too powerful a contrast, what was before him against what he knew was to come. It sent fragments from the blue loop, ones he thought had faded, back into

demonic clarity. He felt at his wand in his pocket, but instead of the single bend of the talon wand, he felt a long straight line with conjoined spheres at the hilt- Dumbledore's wand after he had disarmed him, the bump of those spheres a sensation he would never forget inside his hand as he watched Severus calmly say *Avada Kedavra* and Dumbledore fly...

He pulled his hand out, pushed it back into his pocket, and felt his own bent wand again.

Draco was going flying. Or so he told himself, but didn't make it far before difficulty breathing meant he had to sit. He hadn't put on boots, only his third-best leather shoes, which were soaking through. He cast a warming charm at his feet that did little good, before tossing his wand down with a useless burst of spite and wrapping his arms around himself to shiver.

He was only startled out of self-pity when he heard brash Gryffindor voices approaching, and he had to snatch up his wand and pull himself behind a snowbank. It seemed unlikely that Potter and his quartet of Weasleys would have noticed Draco, though, as they launched into a snowball fight that filled the air with hurtling clouds of white. Even the prefect had joined them, and even he abstained from using magic, instead choosing to freeze his hands through his cheap poorly-made knit gloves by throwing like a Muggle. Draco remembered balls of snow hitting him out of nowhere one year in Hogsmeade, an incident he hadn't put in his notebooks. It must have been before he knew about Potter's invisibility cloak, or surely he would have guessed what was happening. Figured that the Weasleys would have taught Potter that special talent.

He watched them from behind the snowbank, casting warming charms and Impervius after Impervius on himself that seemed to produce no heat or protection whatsoever. He had gotten his festive respiratory fit out of the way already, and he knew it unlikely from experience to have two in the same day, and never in such quick succession. But a strange clenching feeling had afflicted his chest nonetheless at this carnival of barbarity before him. He tried imagining felling each one in turn with Sectumsempra, Weasley and then Potter blood spilling Gryffindor crimson over the pristine white snow they were dirtying- and then even Crucio, their bodies writhing unnaturally in agony- but it didn't do a thing to make that clenching in his chest go away.

He wondered if his parents were still holding their Christmas gala, if his mother missed him at all, if she'd at least considered defying his father and covertly sending him a present before ultimately deciding against it. He pulled out his two presents from Severus, the note and the vial, and was relieved at least to see he hadn't gotten the note soaked. He put it away carefully, and considered the Draught of Peace, but he knew he had better save it for worse to come. Not that it felt like peace was attainable by even magic, for someone so far outside anywhere he could belong.

"No, Ron!" he heard Potter shrieking, running to save his favorite Weasley from the twins shoving snow down the back of his coat. Draco let himself have one unhindered look at the snow-covered figure of Potter, cheeks flushed with cold, clothes and hair wet and plastered with white, glasses askew, smile wild and unrestrained. Draco didn't want to curse him, didn't want to think of him hurt at all. He wanted to be there with him, out there with all of them, part of that undignified tumult as if he had every right to be- and he'd been the one the first time around to call *Potter* unwanted. He'd scoffed at Granger saying he could be friends with

her trio, but had that been what he wanted? To be one of these careless children, too ignorant to know how blessed they were, out there heaving snow in the sunlight like none of them would ever fail or die? Just to be there, to be anywhere Potter was, as perfect as Draco had always hated him for being and more, surrounded by adoration and happiness- as uncomplicatedly good, because Draco hadn't been lying, when he yelled at Potter in the trophy room- Harry Potter was good and kind and right, and Draco was-

Draco was the only thing in the way of him succeeding. Draco and that mirror.

Severus was in his rooms when Draco came to bang on the door, looking none too pleased at this unscheduled visit, or Draco tracking snow over his floors. "What now?" Severus sighed, returning to his armchair with his book and glass of whisky, and Draco squeezed his eyes tightly shut, wishing Severus had given him a different potion than the Draught of Peace. As if there was any potion in the world that could falsely endow him with the courage he needed.

You can do this, Draco told himself, *You're a Malfoy.* Just like he had always used to tell himself, but it made him believe *less* in his ability to say what he had to say.

"Draco?" Severus prompted, and Draco imagined Potter's face in the snow.

"Severus, I'm from the future."

Or at least he tried to say that. He would have, if his tongue hadn't stuck to the roof of his mouth and kept him silent. "Draco?" Severus repeated, looking more irritated, and Draco kept trying to speak and finding himself muted.

"I'm sorry," Draco said, and that came out aloud, tongue momentarily loosening to let out those innocuous words, only to stick back into place and refuse to let him speak, the moment he tried to get out his confession. The words his brain told his mouth to say wouldn't come out.

"Take your time, Draco," Severus said dryly, "Whenever you're ready," and reopened his book, a morbidly interesting-looking tract on ancient poisons.

Langlock. But when Draco tried to say something that *wasn't* about the future, it let him.

"There's this- there's a blue loop," Draco began, too softly for Severus to properly hear him, only for his tongue to lock the moment he tried to explain what that loop was. "There was a mirror in the cellars," Draco tried, and silence. "I'm really 18," and silence. "You killed Dumbledore," he tried in desperation, but only silence for that too.

Draco sank into the chair beside Severus's, grateful for the instruction to take his time, however sarcastically meant. "Can I show you something, sir?" Draco asked, without getting a reply, and picked up his bag to withdraw a spare parchment and quill. He tried to write, *I'm not really Draco Malfoy,* but his wand wouldn't form the words, the way it had when writing for his eyes only. The letters were like distorted runes, wrist twisting as his hand jerked crazily over the parchment, making ink blot through. He tried to write, *You're really dead,* and the same paralysis and spasm afflicted him. He tried to write with his left hand, and

nothing better. Then he used his right hand to write *Today is Christmas,* and the letters came out perfectly clear.

"Have you come to tell me something, Draco," Severus asked dryly, "Or to afflict my room with inane drawings and *mud*?"

"No, I do have something to show you," Draco said frantically, and pulled the first notebook out of his bag. He tapped the cover with his wand, saying Atramencessio, then handed it to Severus. "Please, just read it."

"All of it?" Severus said doubtfully, then opened the notebook and began to flip through, with what seemed an alarmingly flippant approach to contents that at least should be making Severus question his godson's sanity. Finally, he stopped on a page and read aloud, droll and unimpressed. Draco was filled with unspeakable relief before he registered what Severus was reading. "'Showed Finnigan what becomes of tongues that speak ill of Draco Malfoy.' What is this, Draco, your Christmas confession? Will you be disappointed if I do not make the effort to feign surprise?"

"Is that all you can see?" Draco asked, and Severus frowned.

"Is there something else in this notebook I should be seeing?"

The bit Draco had recorded about the red line, and nothing else. Would anything about the blue line just be invisible, to everyone but him? *He* could see the words above the declaration about Finnigan. Had the ink ever even been invisible at all? "Atramencustodio," he said, touching his wand to the page, and watched the words disappear. "Did that do anything?"

"Your confession is now hidden," Severus said dryly, and for him, the sentence had gone as invisible as the potion and spell promised. So they had worked properly. It was just that the world wasn't letting him tell or show anything about the future- or no, based on what McGonagall had told him, his old past. *His* past. The blue loop, she had said, would transfer to the traveler's mind, and only live there. But he couldn't even speak about that memory, or let it out into the world in any way? What kind of enchantments had been on that mirror?

"An impressive charm, Draco," Severus said in an unusually gentle voice. "Is that what you wished to show me?"

Draco shoved his quill and notebook back into his bag, only to feel the inspiration for a lie within it. "In a way, sir. I was working on something with that for your Christmas present, but it still doesn't work properly. So I just have this to give." He produced a small but elegant magically wrapped green box, its surface covered in abstract metallic designs. Severus took it with the wariness of an Auror facing a cursed object in a Death Eater haven.

"What is this, Draco?"

"A present," Draco said weakly. "For you, sir. I know it's late. Please open it. You don't have to keep it if you don't like it, just- I'm sorry."

Compared to the work it had taken to make Granger's bracelet, the ring that greeted Severus had been theoretically easy. With the work of understanding the transfigurations over with, it had taken only a handful of hours to steal a ring of the iron piping in the Slytherin bathroom and transfigure it permanently to a smoother round chunk ring of African turquoise. It had taken far more time, though, over the space of empty December days and nights, to do the small-scale work, trying and retrying to carve that shape all around into the one he wanted- to the point he had begun to think whether learning some sculpting craftmanship to do it by hand like a Muggle wouldn't just be easier. Especially with a wand that preferred blasting things apart. But eventually, Draco had gotten it, if far from perfect, to at least look recognizably like what he had envisioned: an Ouroboros dragon, with all the ridges and scales, a fierce look to the mouth devouring its own tail.

Severus didn't immediately scoff and chuck it into the fire, as Draco might have feared for something as inherently frivolous as jewelry. "A full Ouroboros," he observed, making Draco grin uncontrollably. "Turquoise. An unusual design." He turned it over in his palm to look directly at the head. "Not a snake. A dragon Ouroboros. How predictably narcissistic." With a raised eyebrow at Draco, he slid the ring onto his index finger to try it on, giving Draco a pang when he saw it was a bit big on him.

"Wait," Draco said, and was fast enough to stop the appalled reaction he would expect from Severus, with a first-year pointing his wand at his hand point-blank. A wordless wave of his wand tightened the band of turquoise, with the stone still malleable to his magic but settling. When Severus pulled it off and on again, this time it fit perfectly. Draco was surprised at his own exactitude with the spell, but as with most of the transfiguration, it worked better without him thinking about it much. He had a distraction, then, from the discovery he could not share his secret even if he tried, with the thought he had impressed Severus.

Perhaps too much. "You made this," Severus stated, holding it before the fire critically and turning it around his finger. "You didn't buy it."

"I used transfiguration," Draco said, a further boast dying on his lips when he saw on Severus's face- not the wariness he had come to expect at Hogwarts, but recalculation.

"You did this yourself," Severus said with a frown. "Did you ask Professor McGonagall for help? Or anyone else? The Muggleborn girl?"

As if Severus hadn't learned Granger's name by now. "No, sir. I st- I borrowed some of Theodore Nott's transfiguration books. I used an iron ring from some piping."

"Just that," Severus sighed, and then turned on Draco with ever-sharp dark eyes that Draco should have known would grow suspicious, at a blatant display of having received instruction in Transfiguration far past the first-year level. For the first time, Draco felt a push at his shields from Severus. His first instinct was to reinforce, but then he eagerly pushed his power into dropping them, hoping this could defy the will of magic, either causality or the mirror. But shields remained a palpable presence there, a construct independent of Draco's control, and Severus didn't push for long. When Draco opened his mouth to ask him to use his Legilimency in earnest, force his way inside and see everything, his tongue stuck to the top of his mouth.

"Do you like it, sir?" Draco finally asked meekly.

"One hopes," Severus said coldly, "That in the future, a boy of your talents will find more constructive ends for those skills than crafting unnecessary presents for his godfather."

Draco was grinning as he walked out, despite his inability to tell the truth, despite the further responsibility and isolation that promised. He could think of that later, and maybe find something in the Restricted Section to help...

He felt lighter if anything as he left Severus's rooms, because Severus hadn't thrown the ring into the fire.

The Mirror of Erised

Each time Draco presented Madam Pince with Severus's note for the Restricted Section, she looked more and more unhappy about letting him in, like he was exactly the kind of student who shouldn't be allowed there. But he decided to stretch out the visits anyway. He persisted as if he didn't see the looks she gave him, taking out only one book per session, and spending as much time as he could reading other books while inside the section. After all, Severus hadn't specified how much time he could spend there "looking for" his books.

By the afternoon of the 27th, he had gotten his third book out of the Restricted Section, and was looking forward to reading it slowly and carefully. He had an unusual spring in his step, only to collide with someone waiting outside the library, which sent the book flying from his arms.

"Ow! Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ron Weasley, who sprung away as if Draco had meant to drop it on his feet. Draco picked up his precious cargo protectively.

"Weasley? What are you doing lurking about the library?" Draco assumed it had something to do with this Nicholas Flamel that Potter's trio had been obsessed with all month. Granger had told him that was what was inspiring Potter and Weasley's unusually frequent visits to the library, so far without results. But he wasn't going to let on to Weasley he cared enough to know.

"Waiting for you, actually," Weasley said sheepishly, and held up his hands. "Please don't hex my tongue!"

"I don't know." Draco's hand went to the pocket where he kept his wand. "Should I?"

"Believe me," Weasley whispered, "I wouldn't be talking to you if I had any better option."

Draco rolled his eyes. "You do know how make a bloke feel special, Weasley."

"I need your help," Weasley hissed, and grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into an empty corridor. "And Hermione's not back yet to ask, and I think something's wrong with Harry, but I don't want to get him in trouble, just- it's something to do with the Dark Arts!"

Draco's eyes couldn't have rolled back any further in his head. "Oh, and I course I know all about them, don't I, Weasley?" Weasley blinked guilelessly at him, as if this was perfectly apparent. "And why would I *want* to help you or Potter after-"

"Hermione's your friend," Weasley interrupted, "And she would want you to help us, you know she would..." He looked around surreptitiously, then whispered, "Malfoy, do you know anything about enchanted mirrors?"

Draco dropped his book again. Weasley picked it up and rolled his eyes. "*The Mystical Blood Magic of Dread Lord Grindelwald.* Yeah, Malfoy, you don't know *anything* about Dark Arts."

Maybe Draco had interpreted the guideline of "about time travel" somewhat liberally.

But he could hardly even hear Weasley then over the blood rushing to his head, the sudden pounding in his ears. "What do you mean, an enchanted mirror?"

"Do you know anything about them?" Weasley asked impatiently, and Draco nodded. Part of him was surprised his head didn't freeze on his shoulders. But maybe the threshold would only be crossed if he tried to say something like, *Yeah, the one that sent me to the future.* "Have you ever read about one?" Draco nodded. "Or seen one?" Cautiously, Draco nodded again. "Hermione always says we can trust you, so I'm going to, because it's *Harry*. There's an enchanted mirror at Hogwarts."

"Where?" Draco breathed, alight with a hope he had thought killed by McGonagall's diagram. "What does it look like?"

"I don't have time to explain," Weasley hissed, and looked around furtively. "Listen, can you meet me here in half an hour? It's easier if I just show you." Draco nodded, picked up his book, and tore his way down to the Slytherin dungeons. Even while he knew he was being ridiculous, he cast an expanding charm on his bag and began to pack.

He kept a nervous eye on his watch, patting his pocket to make sure his wand was there. Then he shoved item after item into the bag: notebooks, books from the Restricted Section, pocket money, leftover Murtlap Essence, Draught of Peace, and on impulse even Imoogi, before going under his bed to look for the books he might want. There, he discovered two small packages, sitting unseen until now. One was a perfectly wrapped present, with a tag marked as 'From Mother to Draco'. The other had Muggle-looking wrapping that told him it was from Granger. He hadn't been without presents after all. He just hadn't found them. But he didn't have time to open them, just shoved them into the bag and ran out.

He was still a few minutes late, enough for Weasley to complain as he ran up, though it sounded as much out of anxiety as irritation. Draco had been too full of excitement on his own behalf to think much about Weasley's involvement, but the memory of him saying Potter was in trouble cast a damper on him. "Sorry," Draco said, and Weasley looked so astonished to hear him apologize, Draco almost laughed.

"Okay," Weasley said, eyeing him as if he was someone else taking Polyjuice, and held up something strangely silvery and silky-looking to be in the hands of a Weasley. "Fred and George are distracting Harry with their new version of Exploding Snap, and he probably won't notice this is missing until tonight, but we should still hurry." When Draco just stared at him, Weasley held up the fabric impatiently and waved it in the air. "Come on, Malfoy, you're so clever, don't you know what an invisibility cloak is?"

"Potter let you have his?"

"How did you know it was Harry's?"

Draco put on a pitying expression. "Weasley, I'm genuinely trying to be civil here right now, but do you really want me to explain why I would assume Potter is the one who could afford something as rare and expensive as that?"

Weasley flushed bright red. "Alright, fine, yeah, I get it. Come on. Get under. We have to go somewhere forbidden in the castle. Harry took me to see it this way last night, and since then, he's been really different." Weasley flung the cloak over himself, vanishing like he'd Disapparated somehow within the walls of Hogwarts. Then the watery feel of the cloak was spread over Draco's shoulders too. He ducked his head underneath, letting Weasley cover them both, and looked down to see his body had vanished just like Weasley's.

"Okay, let's go," Weasley said, and began to lead them along. "This was a lot easier with me and Harry," he complained. Draco experienced a brief surge of jealousy at the thought of Potter and Weasley spending time like this forced into such close quarters, before telling himself he was losing it. There was nothing but drudgery in trudging along slowly, bound to a Gryffindor. Not that he would care anyway.

Weasley led him up high in the castle, quiet as he tried to remember the way. It made Draco wonder how many times Potter's trio had shared the cloak like this as children, all three even maybe fitting with their small size. So many adventures, they must have accomplished like this, and now Draco had been pulled to the inside of it. Being an outsider had been much less disconcerting. But the sight of a suit of armor Weasley used as a landmark, and then the stone door Weasley seemed to have been looking for, made Draco's heart pound even more quickly. Soon, maybe in minutes or even seconds, he wouldn't need to worry about Hogwarts or Potter or Weasley or Granger anymore.

It was just a classroom, one long out of use. Draco himself might have randomly chosen it as a place to conduct experiments or hide, except there was a ceiling-high mirror. It was taller than the mirror Draco had seen in Malfoy Manor by far, so he knew it was different, even before he saw it was gold instead of silver. It had clawed feet, and no sign of lights or the triangle symbol Draco remembered segmented between glowing words. He stayed there silent as Weasley shut the door and tugged the invisibility cloak off. Then Weasley flipped on the light and saw Draco's stricken face.

"Hey, it's not that bad, is it?" went Weasley, reading the worst into seeing Draco so unusually shaken. "Do you know what it is? Is it a very evil mirror? Harry found it by accident, running away from Filch on Christmas. He brought me to see it last night, and he wants to come back tonight, so I had to ask you..."

It was a beautiful mirror as antiques went. But Draco had spent a lifetime surrounded by exquisite old artifacts, many more beautiful, if usually on a smaller scale in the Manor. He walked forward with a disappointment that made him want to try to shatter this mirror, as with the last one. But Weasley had called it magical... "What's so scary about it?"

"Harry and I see different things in it," Weasley said, walking before it as if to confirm his hair really was that red. "When I look, I'm older- I'm Head Boy and Quidditch captain, and we won the House Cup and Quidditch Cup," he said, and looked fond as he narrated his vision. "So I thought it could be the future," he went on, not seeming to see Draco's reflection jerking physically in surprise. "But what Harry saw was more like the past. And it's really affected him. He's barely been eating since he found it, and he's looked far away all the time, like nothing interests him but the mirror. He didn't want to play chess or see Hagrid or do

anything. It's like he doesn't care about real life anymore. Do you think this could be dark magic?"

Draco hadn't seen anything but himself in the mirror in Malfoy Manor, and then the aftermath of the shattering charm, reflection splitting as actual glass failed to shatter. "What did Potter see?"

Weasley looked away from his reflection to regard Draco, as if weighing whether dark magic expertise was worth betraying Harry's weakness. Finally, he admitted, "His parents."

That chest-clenching feeling came back with a vengeance, making Draco's hands turn to fists at his sides. "What do you think that means? Why does it show such different illusions?"

"You think it could be illusions?" Ron asked wistfully. "I mean, Harry's parents did exist once, and there's nothing that says I *couldn't* end up as Head Boy and Quidditch captain-"

Except the blue loop in Draco's head. "Did Potter just see his parents, or himself with them?"

Weasley looked sour at the implication. "Himself with them. It was his family standing all around him. He thought the mirror only did that, and brought me to show him all my family."

Draco blinked. "We'd need a bigger mirror."

Weasley turned to glare at him, but he must have seen the humor instead of derision in Draco's face. So he smiled, accepting the deadpan jest. "Easier than showing off *your* family, Malfoy. Isn't your aunt Bellatrix Lestrange? You've got some relatives that would break the mirror-" He broke off when he saw Draco's face fall. "Er, sorry, I was joking too..."

"If you think that mirror is going to show me Aunt Bella," Draco said tightly, wand gripped so tightly in his hand it felt at risk of snapping, "I'm not looking at it."

Weasley could see he was scared. Let him. There were more irrational things to be afraid of.

"I don't think it would. Just try it, okay? And maybe you can figure out what it is."

Weasley stepped out of the way. Draco was gratified by the knowledge he hadn't seen Weasley in all his shallow Gryffindor glory, so Weasley shouldn't able to see whatever vision the mirror conjured up for him. He was doubly glad Weasley couldn't see, when the suggestion of his reflection disappeared completely, to replace it with only Harry Potter. He looked as he had in the dim light of the Quidditch shed, when he confronted Draco over Finnigan, poised right on the edge of saying or doing something irrevocable- except it was Draco on that edge, but Draco had disappeared. Potter looked out at him from inside the mirror, with that fierce look that never failed to split him in two, that look that Draco could travel seven or a hundred years and never escape-

"What do you see?" Weasley asked. Draco forced a grin, though it had to look ghastly. He began to inspect the mirror clinically. Soon, he found an inscription along the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.* "Oh, yeah, I saw there's writing, but it's some language I don't know. Or gibberish. Can you make sense of it?"

Draco reached for his bag and took out his first notebook. He found a page left deliberately empty between his sections about Christmas and New Years. He copied the words in their ornate font, before surrounding them with a drawing of the mirror as he saw it, stepping to the side to avoid Potter's stare. "Are you copying it?" Weasley asked, trying to peer over his shoulder. Draco heaved a sigh of ostentatious frustration. "Guess not."

"Atramencessio," Draco said, tapping his wand, and the drawing didn't change for Draco, but Weasley drew in a sharp breath that showed it had changed in his eyes. It was another data point, in favor of the conclusion the invisible ink worked perfectly, when writing or depicting something in the red line.

"Wow. Is that dark magic?" Weasley sounded impressed in a way that reminded him of Vince.

"I don't know, maybe," Draco said, which what seemed a shockingly lackadaisical attitude to Weasley, judging by his face. "That will do. It'll be good to have a memory aid to study at more length." Draco went over to one of the desks and sat down, wondering where he had seen something like it before. He flipped through his notebook and a word caught his eye in the very first entry: *Ecidyrue.* He'd only remembered the start of the inscription, writing it days after his drunken self saw it only the once. There had been a string of Romanic lettering in no language he knew, at the top of the first mirror as well, just with symbols between the words. Draco stared down at the symbol from between the words, the triangle, and went to the mirror again, trying to ignore Potter's face. "Why are you flinching from the mirror?" Weasley asked. "Is it showing something bad? It isn't really your aunt, is it?"

Draco was thinking what spell might show the symbols if they were hidden. But just tapping his wand between the first two words made the symbol appear. Again, only part of it lit up, this time the central line instead of the circle. None of the words were illuminated around those symbols, but it astounded Weasley still. When Weasley tapped his wand in the next space between words, nothing happened for him, but Draco's wand worked each time, with a total of 8 of the same symbol appearing, the line glowing in each. It was messing with his head, having to wonder now whether what he saw before him was the same as everyone else did. "Can you see these?"

"Yeah, bloody hell, that's brilliant, Malfoy," Weasley said breathlessly, radiating a naive curiosity that made Draco feel uncomfortably old. He'd dragged Draco here out of fear for his best friend. There was still a lightness to his manner, though, that showed no real understanding of how serious this could be, how dark a thing his friend could have gotten caught up in. It would probably be different with Weasley at 18. But right now, his innocence let him look at these shapes appearing and just find it exciting, even with a Malfoy revealing them.

Draco tilted his head, trying to remember if the symbols had been the same on the Manor's mirror. They weren't flipped vertically, and a horizontal flip would render the shape the same. Horizontal but not vertical, the way mirrors showed a reflection... mirror writing, which Theo had used to write him not-so-secret messages in fifth year. Though the letters had been reversed as well, the shapes and not just the order changed for a mirror to reveal. But the

gibberish look to the words with their ordinary length, and the likeness to the mirror whose inscription began with Ecidyrue... if the message was the letters written backwards...

It wouldn't be a particularly sophisticated code, but maybe it wasn't meant to be.

Draco got his notebook and wrote *Ecidyrue*, which turned to *Eurydice* by that rationale and didn't make any more sense. When he reversed the letters of this mirror's full inscription, they didn't seem to make exact words, so maybe that was the issue with *Eurydice,* though he didn't know what full word ended with eury before the common word dice. Today, *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi* became *Ishow no tyo urfac ebu tyo urhe arts desire*. He was sure he was onto something when Erised became Desire. Weasley made a noise like he appreciated it too while staring over his shoulder. "You think it's all just written backwards? That's brilliant!"

He'd said that already, but Draco didn't mind having Weasley repeating himself inanely this time. He rearranged the letters in another sentence beneath to read, *I show not your face but your heart's desire.* The odd juxtaposition of Weasley's fantasy of schoolboy success, with Potter's reunion with dead parents, should have been enough to figure it out already. "The mirror shows whoever looks in it what they want the most," Draco said, only for a wave of nausea to sweep through him that made him drop his notebook, lung function worsening as he understood the meaning of his own words-

"That makes sense!" Weasley crowed, looking relieved. "I don't think that could be dangerous, then, do you?" He preened before the mirror, before Draco gave him a forbidding look that made him step aside.

Draco watched his own reflection disappear and Potter appear instead.

Weasley made an alarmed noise when Draco raised his wand. "Step back, Weasley," Draco said tonelessly, feeling a cold adrenaline populate his veins in place of anything resembling blood. "Finestra," he said, and expected at least a shattering of glass and light in the mirror, but the only light was the flash of his wand. Nothing even registered on Potter's face, watching like the worst kind of taunt. *You're not, you can't be, you've never been what I want...* "Finestra maxima," Draco growled, and again, and again, until he had cast it five times with no effect.

"Malfoy?" Weasley said in a strained voice somewhere behind him. "Did you figure something out? Are you trying to destroy the mirror? You really think it's that dangerous?"

"Yes, Weasley," Draco snapped, "Now let me do what you brought me for," and changed his approach. He had fixed a Vanishing cabinet to let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. He was good with magical objects, surely good enough to destroy one colossally overgrown mirror. "Bombarda!" Draco tried. "Expulso! Bombarda maxima!" It felt like he was casting the charms correctly, but there was no impact on the mirror. Nor was there even the great expulsion of air and pressure there should have been in the radius, as if the mirror was sucking the magic into itself, explosions disappearing on its surface rather than inside it. "Reducto! Confringo! *Confringo*!"

He rested for a moment after, while the Potter in the mirror pushed a stray broomstick back into the rack without taking his eyes off Draco once. Draco was grateful to Father and Severus and even Aunt Bella for every spell that came to his mind to blast at that face. "Aqua eructo!" The jet of water that expelled from Draco's wand wasn't swallowed this time, though the water seemed only to pool out over Draco's feet, and not the soon pristine-again surface of the mirror.

"Ventus! Ventus duo! *Ventus duo!*" Draco bellowed, trying for once to put the full power of the talon wand into the spell. The coldness that formed in the air was something like the swarming of Dementors. He heard desks and chairs blowing over behind him, Weasley scrambling back further, but there was not a crack in the mirror. He focused on the surface, on the glint of light in Potter's glasses, another reflective surface to blast apart. "Diffindo!"

"Draco!" a voice was calling. He just registered it as Weasley, despite how Weasley never called him his first name. "Draco, stop it!"

"Diffindo! *Sectumsempra*!" Draco snarled. He didn't know if the curse would work on non-living objects, but the Potter in the mirror looked like a good enough target to him...

And then Potter grabbed him by the shoulder, and for an awful moment, Draco's wand still lifted, not registering the difference between the real Potter and the reflection. "Sectum-"

"Draco, have you lost your mind?" Potter yelled. It stopped Draco's tongue right before it was too late, because reflection-Potter hadn't spoken. Draco lowered his wand and looked around, only to see Weasley clutching at the far wall for dear life. The abandoned classroom was decimated around them, door blown off its hinges and nowhere in sight. Not a single object in the chamber but Potter and Weasley looked intact: that was, except for Draco's notebook on the ground, and his bag further back, which rested in their own circles untouched by the chaos like the eyes of a hurricane.

"I- I-" Draco blinked rapidly, pocketing his wand, and looked around stunned at the damage he'd done without even denting the mirror. He felt weak and light in his limbs, not quite like during a respiratory fit, but rather like he had been running for a very long time.

"I knew you must have taken my cloak," Potter told Weasley, rounding on Weasley as he gingerly detached himself from his wall, "And I thought you might come here. But I never thought you'd bring *him.* What is this, Ron? What is he *doing*?"

Draco was absurdly proud of Weasley when, bedraggled and terrified within an inch of his life, he still managed to draw himself up and say, "Destroying the mirror, because it's evil."

"I can see my parents in it," Potter said through gritted teeth. "It's not evil."

"Evil? Not quite," a lighter voice said from behind them, and they turned to see Albus Dumbledore stepping in through the rubble.

It had been false bravado, when Draco had bragged to Potter that he'd be pleased to be expelled. The thought of being sent back to Malfoy Manor, to Father, with no hope of going back to the blue line, or telling anyone the truth to explain the senseless things he'd done- it

was almost enough to drown out the absolute ringing in his ears at being in a room with Dumbledore.

"Ron and Draco have both gone mad," Potter said, with a tattletale instinct quite unlike his usual self. He must have been very protective over the mirror. "There's no need to-"

"It is not a thing any of you should have found," Dumbledore said gently. "And yet the three of you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, sir," Potter said abashedly.

"Of course it is, it says, right here," Draco said, gesturing at the inscription a bit wildly. Though really, he didn't have his wand in hand anymore, there was no need for Weasley to keep quite such a wide perimeter. Dumbledore had no such fear, and walked right up to Draco beside the mirror. "Erised is desire backwards, Potter. How can you say the mirror isn't evil if you haven't even figured that much out?"

"So," Dumbledore said, regarding them all with his calming stare. "I expect, then, you've realized by now what it does?"

"It shows what you desire," Weasley said, and Dumbledore nodded.

"The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Indeed, Mr. Weasley, this mirror shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts." Hearing the confirmation from Dumbledore's lips made Draco doubly curse the Potter staring back, as stubbornly if his face had replaced Draco's on his own body too. "However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."

"Sounds like dark magic to me," Draco muttered, glaring at Potter, and reached to show Dumbledore the triangle symbols that had come up between the letters, only to see they were gone. His magic felt so thinly-drawn in his leaden muscles and frustrated mind now, that he doubted his ability even to get the symbols back if he tried.

"Draco, your efforts to save your friends will certainly not be punished. The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, and I ask you all not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that." Potter flinched at Dumbledore's words, looking to take them in more seriously than he had Weasley and Draco's warnings. "But rest assured, Mr. Malfoy, this mirror will be stored where it can be seen by none but those ready to see it. There is no need for its destruction. Much as one applauds the magnitude of effort put forward in that project."

Draco's gaze whipped warily to Dumbledore, Occlumency shields slapping up like slamming doors. But there was nothing but a twinkling-eyed old man gazing back at him. "Now. Back to bed with the lot of you. Now, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to your tower? I will escort Mr. Malfoy myself."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary, sir," Draco said.

At the same time, surprising Draco again, Weasley said, "He didn't do anything wrong, sir, he didn't mean to wreck anything, just the mirror, and he was trying to help Harry." Dumbledore smiled and raised his wand sedately. Wordlessly, every spare bit of debris reconstituted itself, and the water dried until the room was just as it had been before.

"There. No harm done. Good as new," Dumbledore said lightly, then peered out towards the door before waving his wand and fastening the door back on its hinges as well. "Although I do believe that poor knight may be beyond recovery."

There was nothing to do but let Dumbledore escort him back to the dungeons. Draco feared that would lead to interrogation or censure at the very least. But Dumbledore was at his most chipper and harmless and batty for the entire walk, chattering inanely about cinnamon drops and root beer-flavored candy floss, before bidding Draco goodnight.

A Dragon Called Norbert

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thanks so much for all of your comments and thoughts, it's so fun to hear what everyone thinks <3

To address some questions, I wanted Draco's vision of the Mirror of Erised to be kind of ambiguous, but I'll just say it has to do with a combination of three things, you can pick and choose which :)
1. What Draco fears it means: that he's in love with Harry
2. That he wants to become Harry, i.e., to stop being himself and be someone else
3. Specific to the talk he remembers, the image he sees of Harry is from a confrontation where Harry told him, "You're not your father."

As for the question of Draco being more academically advanced than his classmates, teachers have certainly noticed that. Especially Severus- he's given Draco extra Potions lessons. But ultimately, the final decision comes down to Dumbledore, if Dumbledore puts his foot down. And I won't say too much, but it wouldn't suit Dumbledore's plans for Draco for him to do different work than the Gryffindor trio...

Anyway, enjoy! ^^

It took Draco the rest of break to recover physically and magically, drained after the magic he'd done against the mirror. It took even longer in his mind, to recover from what the mirror had shown him. Potter was colder to Draco for weeks after, which was good as far as Draco was concerned. Potter had gone from cautiously seeking Draco's friendship to just trying to hang around him, perhaps because he blamed the loss of the Mirror of Erised on him. But according to Granger, Draco remained regularly the subject of lengthy rants on Potter's part, to the point that all of Gryffindor were starting to get sick of it, even Finnigan. Granger claimed Finnigan had planned to apologize before Draco cursed him, and had started to take the curse in a more philosophical spirit, though that could be attributed as much to fear as taking responsibility. He didn't see Finnigan rushing to take revenge on the purported owner of a mountain troll.

Potter's trio resumed their search after Nicholas Flamel, though Draco derided them and refused to assist. February saw Gryffindor facing Hufflepuff, and with Severus declared as referee, Potter's trio became especially unbearable. Potter and Weasley kept ranting about their certainty of Severus's bias, sabotage, and potential murder attempts on Harry, which were all objectively ridiculous. Well, except the bias. That went without saying.

After seeing Draco in the Restricted Section of the library, rumors spread apropos of nothing that he had learned more dark curses there, and was gathering detached body parts to stitch

into a reanimated monster to terrorize them all at the next Quidditch game. Draco was more confused than anything, until Granger told him that someone had clearly copied the plot of the Muggle book *Frankenstein*. Draco took great pleasure in the nickname Granger gave him afterwards of Dr. Frankenstein. She had not been pleased to return to stories of magical mirrors and invisibility cloaks and roaming the castle at night, but when she heard Weasley had gone for Draco's help and Draco had assisted, she had gone suspiciously complacent about the whole thing.

Draco worried she saw him less as a mad scientist and more as the fourth member of her Gryffindor posse, which was about as likely to happen as her converting him into a Muggle-lover. Granger's Christmas present had proved to be some sort of Muggle hooded sweatshirt, which he felt a master of tact to have pretended to like and not immediately pitched into the nearest fireplace. It seemed rather violent for her usual preferences, navy with red stripes on the sleeves, and a cannon and the word *Arsenal* on front. But there was no accounting for Gryffindors.

His mother's present was breathtaking, and not just in comparison. The new watch seemed to acknowledge Draco's more adult tastes, with its black leather band and green face that uncoiled along the band, once it showed the time, into a pretty glittering garden snake, which sometimes would stretch its head out and delicately lick its forked tongue at the tip of Draco's wand. Maybe it was a reference to the snake that Draco butchered the last time he saw her, some peace offering or covert show of gratitude. Or maybe they were just Slytherins and everything had green snakes on it.

He wore the watch every day, just like Granger wore her bracelet every day. But it wasn't until Valentine's Day that Granger's two pet lunkheads even seemed to notice she'd had something bright blue beside her hand for months. And that was only because Lavender Brown pointed it out, with Valentine's Day falling on a day they had Potions. Before class, Parvati Patil had been showing off a charm bracelet a secret admirer had left her. Poor girl had no idea she would someday end up a charmless Potter's last-ditch resort. Brown had gotten sick of Patil showing off, and pointed out Granger's boyfriend had given her a much nicer charm bracelet, with actual gems and precious stones. She'd forced Granger to hold it up in the air for everyone to see, while Draco had glanced frantically between his watch and the door, hoping Severus wouldn't show up until after it was done. He hardly relished the idea of Severus finding out the transfigurations for his Christmas present had been first practiced for Granger.

It had proved fascinating enough for all of the first-years, Gryffindor and eventually Slytherin as well, to crowd around a hassled Granger while Patil glared daggers at her friend. Brown seemed happy that even if she hadn't gotten a gift from any secret admirers, she'd at least managed to use Granger to upstage Patil. In later years, maybe there would have been less interest. Back in first year, though, there wasn't much romantic activity or dating, only talk of crushes, more teasing than reality. So any rare sign of drama along grown-up lines had all the children engrossed. Weasley looked shocked by all the clamor. Draco thought forward ruefully to him and Granger's future entanglement. Granger could do better than Weasley in her sleep, but she probably wouldn't.

"You- you do, you wear that bracelet all the time, Hermione," Weasley stammered, prompting a chorus of *oohs* from the girls, particularly a contemptuous Pansy Parkinson, who might be soon to get a rude awakening. "Don't you? But- it isn't from a *boy*, is it?"

"No! Not like that," Granger protested. She lowered her arm and tried to hide the bracelet, only for Potter's fingers in turn to pull it out and stare curiously.

"What's this tooth in between the stones?" Potter asked, and Blaise Zabini looked like Christmas had come again in February.

"Why, Potter," Zabini drawled. "Could it be that even with a dragontamer in the family, you and Weasley can't identify a simple baby dragon fang? A *dragon*?"

Pansy let out a belated shriek as the implication sunk in, while Granger rolled her eyes and took her wrist back from a stunned-looking Potter. "Is that from Draco?" Potter breathed. "Did he give that to you?"

"Yes, he did," Granger said, pulling her wrist to her defensively. That prompted a chorus of *oohs* and *ahs* and teasing from all and sundry, only a step above small children at 8 or 9 running around screaming about the other gender having cooties. "For my birthday, not Valentine's Day. And it's not a romantic present. Draco and I are just friends."

Weasley's pole-axed whimper of, "Why didn't you tell us you got that from *Malfoy*?" could hardly be helping matters. Nor could the sour look on Potter's face.

"Shut up, shut up!" Pansy yelled, cheeks red with a look that Draco knew from experience meant she was fighting back tears. "Of course Draco doesn't like her!"

"Yeah, because she's a girl," said Dean Thomas, without any rancor, and Pansy grimaced.

"No, because she's a *Mudblood*," she hissed venomously, in a whisper loud enough the entire classroom heard it, and there was a stunned silence. And then Weasley drew his wand.

"Don't you call her that!" Weasley shouted. It was pure déjà vu, except Draco had been the Slytherin on the other end of Weasley's wand. He still remembered Weasley with that broken wand, cursing himself to vomit slugs. He and Vince and Greg had made each other sick laughing over it for weeks. Weasley's wand didn't look broken yet, but best not to chance it.

"Pansy," Draco said, stepping in front of Weasley's wand and risking all manners of slug-related indigestion. "What did you just call my friend?"

"What- what she is," Pansy stammered, looking less sure of herself than against Weasley. Draco looked between her and Hermione, with a feeling he had to cut this off at the root.

"Whatever she is, Pansy," Draco said, "She is my friend. *Mine.* So if you speak ill of her, you speak ill of me. And what becomes of tongues that speak ill of Draco Malfoy?"

Pansy shrank back, nearly falling into her chair. She covered her mouth with a look of real fear in her eyes. Draco remembered those eyes looking back at him after his disastrous first kiss with her, an hour after the end of the Yule Ball. He found he had no space in him for pity.

"Fascinating as this is," Severus intoned from the front of the classroom, "This is still a place of learning, not a social hall. Detention, Miss Parkinson."

Severus's arrival cowed everyone into silence. There were still a number of disbelieving looks given to Severus at that punishment, none more so than by Potter's trio. The idea of Severus having gone against a Slytherin, punishing her for anti-Muggleborn language, had to be almost unthinkable to them. But Severus hadn't sided with Hermione, he'd sided with *Draco* against Pansy. It had been a signal to anyone with eyes that Severus would back Draco up in a conflict. And Draco trusted that for any Slytherin worth their salt, the message was taken in. Pansy, for one, didn't try to call Granger names anymore.

The only real consequence to this little squabble was an increased chilliness towards Draco from the other Slytherins, especially the girls. But Draco had already been such an outsider in his house that something a little worse was barely noticeable, even for his tender ego. From Gryffindor, there was a bit of weirdness with Potter and Weasley. It was as if Draco had never told them he was gay. Granger called them ridiculous, each time it got brought up or weird looks exchanged at their library table. Once, she exclaimed that didn't they think if Draco fancied her, he would be calling her something other than Granger by now? She ruined this bit of reasoning, though, by asking Draco if, now that he publicly had declared her his friend, whether it was not simply silly to go on calling her Granger and not Hermione?

She didn't know he had seven years and change of calling her Granger if she was lucky, Mudblood if she wasn't, instead of a half-year and so of the name Granger to erase. She was still Granger when she came to him excited one day and announced they had found the answer to their Nicholas Flamel question, showing him an Albus Dumbledore chocolate frog card of all things, before repeating the story of Hagrid's slip about the package from Gringotts being business between Dumbledore and Flamel. She insisted he come out of the library with her and her boys to see something next. He was left waiting awkwardly in the Gryffindor common room for her to come down from the girls' dorm with a book. Potter and Weasley's presence kept anyone from trying to eject him, but he stood out like a green sore thumb in this tacky eyesore of a common room. At least soon enough she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

"I never thought to look in here!" Granger whispered excitedly. "I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

"Light?" said Weasley, but Granger told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for. "I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are we allowed to speak yet?" said Weasley grumpily. Granger ignored him.

And then the moment came that Draco stopped being able to deride them anymore. "Nicolas Flamel," she whispered dramatically, "Is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone!"

Draco gasped aloud, covering his mouth to keep from drawing even more attention to his intrusion into Gryffindor. Potter and Weasley exchanged looks and went, "The what?"

"Oh, honestly, don't you two read? See, Harry, this is why I needed *Draco* here- he knows what it is, don't you, Draco?"

Draco smiled at her a bit weakly, reaching out and flicking fondly at the turquoise bracelet on her wrist before answering. "Of course I do. It's one of the cornerstones of alchemy. It's supposed to be able to turn any object to gold, or grant the owner eternal life." And it sounded exactly like something Voldemort would want. If he was back yet, which he wasn't, but still-

Draco suddenly wished he'd spent less time laughing at Granger and more time helping.

Weasley and Potter needed to read the passage before they understood. "See?" said Granger. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Philosopher's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it. That's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you ever dying!" said Potter, because the uneducated were always getting astonished at everything.

"No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it," Granger said excitedly, only to cast a reflexive look at Draco and wither. "Draco, I know you don't believe he's involved, but really-"

"I want to help," Draco said, hand stroking over his wand in his pocket, "But I don't know why none of you will listen to me about Professor Snape."

"Because Snape is *obviously* after it!" Potter yelled, then covered his mouth.

"No need to scream at him, mate," Weasley said sympathetically, and patted him on the shoulder. "See, me, *I've* gotten used to having Malfoy around Hermione. It's like a magical car. Sure, you don't know what it is or how it works, and you never know where it's gonna go or what it's gonna do. But you sure can get somewhere with it. And it's better than no car at all."

"Thank you for that. As illustrative as that analogy was, Ronald, I believe we can predict exactly how Draco will feel about our suspicions against Professor Snape. So perhaps we can agree to disagree. Because the thing we can agree on is that the Philosopher's Stone is too powerful to fall into the wrong hands."

It was, and that would have proved sufficient enough inducement for them to agree to disagree, should the Snape issue not recur and recur. During Gryffindor-Hufflepuff, Draco allowed Granger to drag him to sit with her and Weasley. He justified it to himself, as he did more and more things these days, by reckoning that it was more effort than it was worth to resist her nagging. And it wasn't like the whole school hadn't known he was consorting with Muggleborns and Gryffindors for months.

They ended up beside Longbottom, whom Draco found he had come to have a soft spot for. Well, in the sense that if Longbottom was burning to death and Draco had a bucket of water,

he might consider throwing it on Longbottom if he had nothing better to do. None of them got a chance for much socializing, though. The match ended disappointingly quickly, with Potter catching the Snitch in less than five minutes. Draco must have had that written in his notebook for today, but he hadn't remembered to check it. He did remember Severus's intense disappointment, along with brawling with Weasley in the stands. Now Weasley was grabbing his arm manically as he cheered his head off, Granger hugging his other arm as she screamed in his ear. Draco found himself a bemused snake amidst the merriment of lions.

It had been a good catch by Potter, though. Even Draco had to admit that.

How well Potter had played that afternoon, swooping around the Quidditch pitch triumphantly haloed by the sun, had almost made Draco inclined to forgive him anything. That resolution that lasted all of about twelve hours, before Potter came to him breathless with a story about following Severus on his broom into the Forbidden Forest, and seeing him terrorizing Quirrell. Potter seemed convinced this was all perfectly sane behavior on his part, stalking teachers at night on broomsticks into the Forbidden bloody Forest. Just another Saturday night for a Gryffindor. And this escapade had further proved in the eyes of Potter's trio that Severus was after the Philosopher's Stone, and trying to get Quirrell to help him.

"I'm telling you, *Quirrell* is the one who's up to no good," Draco kept insisting, to the point he *would* have just shouted he knew better because he was from the future, if his tongue hadn't locked each time he so much as thought about it. Finally, he told them all that, say what they wanted, time would prove him right. That much was vague enough to escape the enchantment on his speech. He went on to add that when Severus was proved innocent and Quirrell the guilty one, he would expect far more recompense for his suffering than just the chance to say *I told you so*.

"Fine. Let's make a bet," Weasley said. "If we're right, and Snape really is after the Stone, then what should we ask for, Harry?"

Draco expected a boring Gryffindor dare. But when Potter turned to Draco with steeliness in his green eyes, Draco could see a flash of Slytherin in him. "If we're right, then Draco has to show us what's really written in all those notebooks in invisible ink."

"Well," Draco said, amused at a forfeit impossible to perform if he tried, "That would be terrible indeed. But if I'm right and Professor Snape is being falsely accused, then Granger has to admit to me that *I* am the cleverest student in first-year." Granger looked appropriately mutinous, so Draco turned to Weasley. "Weasley has to- oh, stop giving me those looks, you chose a forfeit individually for me, I'll choose for each of you as well. Weasley has to say I'm funnier than him, in front of the Gryffindor common room. And Potter..." Draco let his eyes fall on Potter with all the fond malignance in the world. "Potter has to wear a Slytherin uniform on the last day of term."

"What?" Potter protested. "Why is my punishment so much worse than theirs?"

Because you're the one I want to look at in a Slytherin uniform.

"Why, I don't know," Draco said, dramatically widening his eyes in a parody of the three's innocence, and made Weasley laugh, by using an expression Potter had gotten sick of months

ago. "Could it be... *because you're Harry Potter*?"

He got to see Potter and Weasley's suffering sooner, as Granger began to humorously overreact to the prospect of exams *ten whole weeks away.* She made so many revision tables and color-coded notes that even Draco had to join in laughing, and she swatted at him with her bracelet to sting his hand. "Oh, it's all very well for you, Draco, you don't even *have* to study."

It wasn't really true. Just because he had done this year before, and had more years of experience with magic, it didn't mean he could just instantly remember everything, especially sets of things to memorize like in History of Magic. But brushing up and reminders were quicker than learning it the first time, with the practical portion of exams a cinch. Spending most of his time in the library, then, meant a mix of coursework with independent research filling up more of his notebooks. He used the invisible ink that all three Gryffindors declared drove them insane. "That eager to snoop, Potter?" Draco drawled, unable to prevent his natural habit of choosing Potter to pick on out of the three. "You always have had a penchant for spying. I'm sorry to disappoint if you find me so *fascinating.*"

Potter got so murderous a look on his face that Draco was sure his comeback would have been a things for the history books, if he could have thought of one. But he was fumingly silent for that brief window of opportunity, before Granger inserted her face between them, sighing, "*Boys*," and that meant the end of any non-academic talk.

Draco wrote a letter to his mother before sign-ups for Easter break, asking if she wanted him to come home for Easter. He had every year except sixth. It wasn't exactly that he *wanted* to go home, but just to know whether it was an option. Or at least to hear something from his parents after that Howler as the months stretched on, rather than leaving him in limbo. In the end, he didn't send the letter, and got a wry look from Severus for once again covering half of Slytherin's holiday sign-up sheet with the block letters of DRACO MALFOY.

The amount of homework the teachers were piling on was getting to Potter and Weasley. They were nearly always at Draco and Hermione's table in the library over break. If anyone had asked- not that Draco tended to exchange more words than necessary with his old pureblood friends- he would have admitted that Granger was his friend because of her exceptional intelligence. But he'd say he just barely tolerated the presence of Weasley and Potter for her sake- that he would, in fact, sooner call *Seamus Finnigan* a friend than either of them. But by his side they remained, yawning, moaning, complaining, and going on about how much they'd rather be outside.

When Draco scoffed, Potter reminded him bitterly that Draco was one to talk, with his hour-long night broom rides. The disclosure scandalized Granger, and made her fear incessantly for his impending expulsion, until he pulled her aside, and admitted they'd been permitted retrospectively and going forwards. Severus had strong-armed the other professors into allowing it, on the grounds of helping Draco's anxiety, though Draco didn't repeat that part. "No wonder you defend him," she said, shaking her head all the more judgmentally. "He really favors you, doesn't he?"

Draco shrugged laconically. "Someone has to."

Draco was thinking fondly again of Severus, smiling at the memory of being caught breaking into his stores for dittany, before he answered Potter's question about what dittany was. At that moment, Weasley called out, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?" It was extraordinary, given that Draco would have taken even odds that the half-giant couldn't read. But he'd always been careful to keep his thoughts on Hagrid to himself this time around.

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat. "Jus' lookin'," Hagrid said, in such a bad attempt at lying, it was like someone had cursed him to be that obvious. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious, no doubt worsened by the presence of the likes of Malfoy with his beloved golden trio. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," Weasley said nonchalantly, showing off knowledge he'd played no part in acquiring. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Philosopher's St–"

"Shh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?" Little as Draco had ever thought of Hagrid, particularly after that great ugly Hippogriff savaged Draco, he had to heartily concur with him there. Until he saw Hagrid was looking directly at him.

"Don't worry," Granger said confidently, "Draco knows everything about it."

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Potter, "About what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy-"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid again. "Listen- come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'posed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh-"

"See you later, then," said Potter.

Hagrid shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" said Granger thoughtfully. "Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Weasley, showing a rare bit of productive initiative. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"Dragons!" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide."

Oh, right. Hagrid had spent some time in first year hatching that ridiculous dragon, with help from Potter. Draco had tried to inform teachers of their wrongdoing and gotten detention in the Forbidden Forest for his troubles, because Hogwarts was rigged against Slytherins.

Granger felt at the fang on her bracelet and smiled. Draco stuck out his tongue at her, choosing not to admit he'd read a lot of those books when he was younger. Not just because of his name, but because his childhood self had thought they were the coolest thing in the world.

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him," said Potter.

Apparently Hagrid and 8-year-old Draco had more in common than he would have thought.

"But it's against our laws,' said Weasley. "Dragon-breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden- anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain?" said Potter, and glanced briefly at Draco. Draco could tell he was remembering when they met, when Potter had been overjoyed at Draco telling him dragons were real. But neither mentioned it.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Green and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our lot have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"So what on earth's Hagrid up to?" said Granger, then seemed to notice Draco was being unusually quiet, on a favorite subject of his. "What do you think, Frankenstein? You'll come to us with Hagrid's, won't you?"

It made Draco feel awkward in a way he hadn't for weeks. "Don't think the invitation extended to me," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Go off and have your little adventure, children. I'll be in the library."

The Gryffindors were quick to tell him about it the next time they saw him, and that was soon. Extra homework and revision meant Potter and Weasley were at their library table almost constantly. They said Hagrid had got himself a dragon egg and was planning to illegally hatch it. "Sweet Salazar, woman," Draco gaped, scandalized by the manner of the delivery rather than the news itself, which he had written down already on a nearby page in the first notebook. "Are all Gryffindors this suicidally trusting, or is it only a specialty of the most troublesome ones?"

"Malfoy won't tell anyone, will you, Malfoy," Weasley said contentedly. Draco could only find Weasley's show of faith disturbing. At least Potter had the virtue to look up and look Draco over.

"You won't, will you?" Potter asked more seriously, and Draco nodded.

"I don't really care," he sighed. After all, he knew all would be well without his interference. Save for the detention he earned himself, but he could avert that by just locking himself in his bed in Slytherin and refusing to come out that night. "As long as I don't get dragged into it."

Not a week passed before Draco was dragged into it.

At first, he got more studying done, with his library table's usual occupants off at Hagrid's hut. He heard bits and pieces about it, though, almost regretting his decision to absent himself when they enthused over watching the creature hatch. At some point around the turn of the year, though, imperceptibly, he had decided to take a unilaterally passive approach. Granted, trying to blow up the Mirror of Erised with every spell in his arsenal was hardly adhering to that philosophy. The passive approach did tend to strain if Draco got angry. But he was passive about the dragon, up until he heard Hagrid had named the beast Norbert.

"Norbert?" Draco hissed, positive that at any moment steam was going to start coming out of his ears. "Why? What could it possibly have done in a former life to deserve being called *Norbert*? You might as well call it Fluffy. What, is it because it's alliterative? Norbert, Norwegian ridgetail? No, surely Hagrid can be made to see reason-"

Potter was watching him closely, a smile threatening to curl up at the corner of his lips. "I don't know if I've ever seen you this passionate about anything."

"What, Malfoy?" Weasley asked. "What would be a proper name for a dragon?"

"Imoogi, for one," Draco blurted without thinking. He lifted his chin defiantly at their strange looks. "It's from a very ancient and beautiful legend. None of you lot would understand it."

The smile left Potter's face when Weasley imparted the news that the newly christened Norbert was being packed off to Weasley's brother Charlie. Draco made a show of excitement about it, more to horrify Weasley than anything. "That's the one who's queer, isn't he?" Draco cooed, doing his best impression of Brown with Weasley in sixth year. "The strong, handsome, dragontamer Weasley? If you're writing to him, why don't you put in a good word for me? Tell him you have a classmate of yours who likes men- brilliant, blond, devastatingly handsome-"

"He's *old*," Potter cut in violently, looking more outraged than Weasley and Granger put together. Weasley didn't even have time to get grossed out, with Potter's overreaction to distract him. "He's way too old for you. You shouldn't talk like that, Draco. You're eleven, for God's sake-"

"I won't be eleven forever," Draco said nonchalantly. Both Granger and Weasley seemed to stifle laughter, as Potter became the one with smoke almost coming out of his ears.

Draco had wanted to stay out of the dragon business. But surely name-based grounds of interference were negligible enough, and wouldn't set anything in the blue loop off course. He felt like a stranger to himself, as he voluntarily left the castle for a reason other than flying, tromping off to Hagrid's hut alone, with the feeling he was about to have at least one or two sharp-clawed creatures set on him at any moment. When he knocked on the door, Hagrid answered with a face that clearly expected Potter, only to fall when he just saw Draco standing there. "Hello, Draco," Hagrid said after a moment, masking his surprise. "The others righ' behind yeh?"

"No," Draco said, shrinking back slightly, only to tell himself that Malfoys did not cringe before commoners. "Would you terribly mind taking a walk with me, Hagrid?"

"Oh," Hagrid said, looking further disappointed. "Yeh ain't come t'see the dragon?"

Draco smiled thinly. "I prefer the more controllable variety of reptile myself," he said, and held up his mother's enchanted watch to show Hagrid the snake as it took shape and coiled up. Then he cast a spell to conjure a butterfly made of light, and showed Hagrid how eagerly the snake swayed towards his wand and licked at its end right after it had done magic.

The snake proved as fascinating to Hagrid as a real creature, once Draco let slip that it looked rather like garden snakes at Malfoy Manor. Then nothing would do but for Hagrid to hear about all the creatures across the Manor and its grounds, which took some time. He seemed most fascinated by the albino peacocks. Draco told him of their work guarding the Manor, and showed Hagrid a faded scar or two on his arms, where the peacocks had gotten him when he was young. Hagrid's childlike enthusiasm was contagious. Draco found they had reached the Great Lake before he knew it, the impending sunset already a lovely pink over the water.

"So what'd yeh wanna talk of, then?" Hagrid asked, joining Draco in staring out over the water. Inexplicably, Draco lost the impetus to complain about the dragon's name.

"I just- just wanted to tell you," Draco said, clearing his throat and searching for anything else to say. "That, well, I know that there's a plan now to get the dragon out through Weasley's brother. But if it falls through, there could be some other avenues to explore remaining, such as contacting Gringotts- they might be willing to purchase privately- or- well, I'm not on the best terms with my father, but if I wrote to Mother, she might be able to arrange something- my family's private connections- since in any event, it would be judicious to have a Plan B and C when the outcome of no safety plan involves dragonfire-"

Hagrid was watching Draco with a fondness on his face that Draco would never have expected. "Yeh do remind me mightily o' Hermione a' times, yeh know that?"

Draco looked down at the water, embarrassed to be spoken to in so kind a tone, even if it was only for his likeness to Hagrid's actual friend. "I just want everything to come off smoothly. I don't want anything on fire." He remembered Aunt Bella setting Hagrid's hut on fire, after Draco let her into Hogwarts. He fought off a wave of nausea, trying to push the thought away before dwelling on it could make it hard to breathe. "I don't want to see your hut or the castle burn."

Hagrid shot him an abashed look, scuffing his foot in the bank. "Yeh mus' think I'm bein' well foolish wi' Norbert an' all, eh?"

Draco stared out at the water, and watched as the pink of the sunset darkened to something more like fire. "I've done stupider things."

Things started to go pear-shaped without much delay. Weasley got himself bitten by Norbert, with Charlie's friends only able to arrange a covert pick-up that Saturday night. In the meantime, Weasley's hand swollen up and seemed to get infected. Granger told him all about it, though Draco refused to come with her to visit Weasley in the Hospital Wing. Appallingly enough, Draco found himself missing Weasley, if only for the loss of a buffer at their table between Draco and Potter. By the night of the hand-off, Weasley was still too badly off in the

Hospital Wing to think of helping. It was too late to change the plan. Hermione said that meant it fell on Draco to be Weasley's replacement.

"You have got to be kidding me," Draco whined, as Granger dragged him out towards Hagrid's hut. What terrible places this habit of giving in to Granger's nagging had taken him! "You don't need me here, come on, we'll barely fit under the cloak-"

"Three heads are better than two," she said firmly. *You mean two heads are better than one*, he thought, Potter not exactly qualifying. But he hardly wanted to fuel Potter's dislike towards him, right before they were going to be collectively responsible for something so inherently flammable. Inside the hut, Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate. "He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

Somehow Draco doubted the teddy bear would survive its transit with darling Norbert.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Potter, Granger, and Draco covered the crate with the Invisibility Cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mummy will never forget you!"

"'Mummy'?" Draco hissed incredulously at the Gryffindors, and Granger just shook her head with an anxious smile.

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, Draco never knew. He had to admit, it would have been quite the burden for just Potter and Granger to carry alone. A Featherlight charm would be too dangerous to cast on any object holding an animal capable of flight. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall and along the dark corridors. Up another staircase, then another... Even one of Potter's shortcuts didn't make the work much easier.

"I'm going to be expelled for this," Draco hissed, "Do you know that? Even for the family name, my father won't save me anymore. And Malfoys have been expelled from Hogwarts before, but *never* in the process of undertaking-" Draco shuddered underneath the cloak- "*Manual labor.*"

"They can't fix everything for you, Draco, magic and money and Malfoys," Potter whispered. Then they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower, and Potter panted out, "Nearly there!" The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they'd stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to breathe properly again. Granger breathed a sigh of relief and threw her head back to the night sky, clearly on edge after all of Draco's talk of expulsion. But then Potter and Draco sniped at each other so much, breaking her brief respite of peace, and she threatened to hex them both if they didn't just shut up.

And so they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were an exceedingly Gryffindorish rabble, friendly in a way that Draco found rather off-putting. But no, they just *had* to waste time showing Potter and Granger the harness they'd rigged up so they could suspend Norbert between them. They looked surprised

at Draco's refusal of the same offer. Eventually, they helped buckle Norbert safely in, and then Potter and Granger shook hands with the others and thanked them. A sharp look from Granger, and Draco stepped forward and did the same, though he saw a look or two askance at the white-blond of his hair.

And so Norbert escaped with that hideous name in tow.

The three of them went back down the spiral staircase, with Draco crowing inwardly about his expert job conforming to the blue loop in Weasley's role. Something Draco had done must have distracted Weasley, or changed some timing enough to get Weasley bit. But Draco had been there then to perform his office and keep Potter and Granger from being too fatally Gryffindorish. Maybe they wouldn't even have to finish that part with detention in the Forbidden Forest-

Except for that waiting at the foot of the stairs, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, well, well," he whispered, "Lights on the Astronomy Tower, and now we are in trouble."

And Draco realized they'd left the invisibility cloak on top of the tower.

Put that down as a win for the blue loop.

The Forbidden Forest

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I've made a playlist for this fic, which I'll be updating with a song for every chapter! Here's the link:

The Mirror of Ecidyrue playlist

Severus was never in a good mood when woken up in the middle of the night. And being woken by Filch had to be the worst way to get up. Filch was grinning like the cat who'd caught the canary, as if delivering Severus's favorite student to him in disgrace would be a top ten life highlight. All in all, Draco was glad he wasn't overly attached to his current existence. He had to envy Granger and Potter for only facing McGonagall.

After Filch delivered the sordid tale, Severus barked for him to leave them alone in his office, with a face like death itself- only for the fury to drop away as if had never been there at all. "Really, Draco?" Severus commented mildly. Draco had seen him look considerably more irritated at covert attempts to help Longbottom in Potions. "Caught at the Astronomy Tower past midnight? As a *first-year*? If it were only Potter you were with, I might fear the worst-" Draco opened his mouth indignantly. "But with Granger there as well, I can assume the Astronomy Tower was not being used for its usual purpose by students at night-"

"I'm eleven!" Draco said indignantly, "I'm a virgin!" He wasn't sure if he was technically lying. "And- and I never would with a girl, or worse, with *Potter*! He's the most loathsome, overrated-"

"Was anyone casting aspersions on your *virginity,* Draco?" Severus drawled, looking truly amused by then. Perhaps he hadn't been asleep yet when Filch came to get him. "Interesting your mind goes there at your tender age, when the traditional pastime for the Astronomy Tower is *kissing*. Should your godfather anticipate *trouble* in this quarter in the years to come?" And hearing Severus call himself Draco's godfather unprompted said this would be fine.

The last time he'd been in Severus's office in serious trouble, he'd been suspected, correctly so, of hitting a first-year with one of Severus's own dark curses, which the teachers were struggling to undo. And Severus had found Draco mature enough to allow sessions of unchaperoned flying on Sunday nights. One would hardly anticipate Severus to blow his top over more roaming the castle after hours. Not in comparison to what else Severus could have been roused for Draco having done.

"Professor Snape, sir," Draco said earnestly, "I am truly sorry for my actions, and the position they must place you in. I understand however many points you need to take from Slytherin,

or any other discipline you see fit." It wasn't like they were going to win the House Cup anyway, with Dumbledore still in charge. "I know you will want an explanation, for which I can only offer that I caught word of my valuable study partner, Granger- whom I know you find to be an insufferable know-it-all, sir, which she is, but she's also irreplaceable for my studies, because I'm-"

"Going to be an Unspeakable, yes," Severus finished drolly. "Continue."

"I caught word she was being dragged into some hare-brained scheme by Potter, but by then it was too late to stop them. So I tracked them down and tried to get them back to Gryffindor safe, but Filch caught us-"

"And you have no idea what this hare-brained scheme was?" Severus said dryly. He sounded amused by how obvious he found Draco's hedging of the truth.

"None, sir," Draco said, keeping his gray eyes wide and pure and childish. Severus began to laugh, a rare deep sound that always made Draco's heart feel warm.

"Well, admirable as your attempt was to correct the errors of the dangerously arrogant young Potter, for Granger's sake," Severus concluded, "You *have* been caught out after hours without permission. As your Head of House, I have no choice but to take 20 points from Slytherin and assign you detention. But I see no need to inform your parents of any of this."

Remembering the 150 points taken off Gryffindor, Draco could only fight to hide a smile. "Thank you, sir- I mean, I accept your discipline, sir."

Draco had a spring in his step as he made his way to the dorms. How could the Gryffindors think anyone as wise and beneficent as Severus Snape could possibly be responsible for any wrongdoing?

The news of Severus's clemency compared to McGonagall, who had taken 50 points off each instead of Severus's 20, seemed to turn the trio even more firmly to the opinion that Severus was working for the forces of evil. "I don't understand," Granger said, looking to be fighting back tears, while Potter looked incredibly glum by her side. "Why is it 20 for you and 50 for each one of us? Everyone hates us now, Draco! We're *pariahs*! Are the Slytherins mad at you too?"

Draco hardly thought they would be, given that everyone thought their mysterious escapade had single-handedly cost Gryffindor the House Cup. But it wasn't like he had any means of gauging. "I don't know, honestly," Draco said with a shrug. "I mean, no one in my house really talks to me anyway, so if they were mad, it'd be pretty hard to tell the difference."

He earned bemused stares from all three at that. "You're an outcast in Slytherin?" Weasley gaped. "Why? You're *such* a Slytherin!"

Because I'm fool enough to be seen with Gryffindor blood traitors and half-bloods and Muggleborns like the lot of you. "A lot of things. I mean, maybe it's that a lot think I'm the one who set that troll out in the dungeons in Halloween."

"Still?" Weasley marveled, while Potter got a shifty sort of look.

"Before you say it, Potter- yes, I know you think Professor Snape was the one to let it out, and no, he wasn't. Do you think Snape couldn't come up with a better diversion than a *troll*? And in fairness to my fellow Slytherins, I did make a number of ill-advised jokes about Malfoys being the Dark Lords of Trollkind, before I realized they were taking me seriously."

Say this for the trio, none of them looked surprised. Weasley nodded knowingly. "Right. It's pretty impossible to tell when you're joking or not."

Draco chose to ignore that slight on his objectively superlative sense of humor. Weasley would soon be admitting Draco was funnier than him anyways. "What I don't understand is why Longbottom was caught up in it as well." Draco hadn't even been there to goad him this time.

Potter looked guilty. "He woke up and saw Ron and I missing, and, well, after the midnight duel he got caught up in, I think he worried we were up to something like that again, and went out to find us and bring us back."

Maybe they'd make a Gryffindor of Longbottom yet. Slaying giant snakes was surely only a step beyond. "If you're even *thinking* of bringing him to our study table now that he's a pariah as well, I might have to start looking up troll magicks after all to set one on him."

A curious side effect of the disgrace in which Potter and Granger were held by the rest of the school was that along with the intense pressure of exams, coming genuinely soon, they were driven to spend the majority of their time with Draco. His study table proved a refuge, as no one dared make comments or even give dirty looks with Draco in the vicinity. The one time a passing Hufflepuff- Zacharias Smith, that badger-faced simpleton- saw fit to sneer at their table, snickering something about traitors to Gryffindor, Draco caught his gaze, stuck out his tongue, and mimed pressing it to the roof of his mouth. A surprisingly difficult pantomime, but from the way Smith and his cronies positively screeched out of the library, an effective one.

Weasley started laughing so hard he nearly fell out of his chair, while Granger sighed ostentatiously, with a reluctantly amused smile. Draco leaned over and flicked at the Kali yantra on her bracelet, waggling his tongue at her too. Only Potter seemed to genuinely disapprove.

"It's one thing to curse Seamus that awfully," Potter said heatedly. "But now you're using it to threaten anyone who looks at me funny?"

"Alright, Potter," Draco sighed. "Let's get two things straight. One, I was not threatening that manure-brained amphibian for you *or* for Weasley. *Granger* is my friend, and the two of you are her hanger-ons I begrudgingly tolerate, while inwardly wishing creative manners of ill to dislodge your unwanted presence. If you think I would bestir myself to *your* defense, Potter, you remain as arrogant as Professor Snape thinks you. And two- curse *Seamus*? You mean Seamus Finnigan? That admirable specimen of a Gryffindor? Why, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Potter earned his genuine ire, though, when a week before the exams were due to start, he came to the library with reports of more eavesdropping. This conversation had Quirrell begging for mercy and giving in to someone. Immediately, Weasley's conclusion was, "Snape's done it, then! If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell-"

"There's still Fluffy, though," said Granger, while ignoring the dirty look Draco was giving them all.

"Still think Quirrell is the one trying to steal the stone?" Potter asked Draco triumphantly. "Now we *know* he was trying to protect it, but someone's threatened him who's the real-"

"Rest assured, Potter," Draco said through gritted teeth, "I remain as convinced as ever of your impending debut in Slytherin colors."

"Maybe Snape's found out how to get past him without asking Hagrid," said Weasley, looking up at the thousands of books surrounding them. "I bet there's a book somewhere in here, telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Harry?"

"Go to Dumbledore. That's what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves we'll be thrown out for sure." Draco was proud to hear Granger's instructions, even though he knew from the blue loop that Potter wouldn't follow it.

"But we've got no proof!" said Potter. "Quirrell's too scared to back us up. Snape's only got to say he doesn't know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor- who do you think they'll believe, him or us? It's not exactly a secret we hate him, Dumbledore'll think we made it up to get him sacked." Potter looked more defiant at the pointed glare Draco gave him. "See, Draco doesn't even believe us! Dumbledore definitely won't. And Filch wouldn't help us if his life depended on it, he's too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he'll think. And don't forget, we're not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That'll take a lot of explaining."

"What requires explanation, Potter," Draco sighed, "Is why someone not licking your boots for once is sufficient proof that they're a dark wizard at large, bent on the downfall of civilization-"

"No one is 'licking my boots', Draco, as if you haven't noticed! Everyone hates me since we lost those points, which we wouldn't have if *you* hadn't forgotten the cloak on top of the tower-"

"Oh, so that was *my* fault-"

"*Boys.*"

Next morning, Draco's fellow Slytherins looked curious but didn't ask when Draco got a note. Post was rare for Draco, with the days of regular lavish care packages to share long over. The note read,

Your detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight. Meet Filch in the Entrance Hall.

Professor Snape

P.S. Don't wear your best shoes, vain boy.

"Oh, it's boring," Blaise concluded, who'd been reading over Draco's shoulder without him knowing. "Just detention," he told the other first-years.

"What did you expect," went Draco, rolling his eyes, "A formal notice I'd been disowned?"

From the looks on their faces, it seemed they found that plausible.

Potter, Granger, and Longbottom were already there waiting with Filch, by the time Draco made it down to the entrance hall at 11 sharp. "Follow me," said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them outside. "I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?' he continued, leering at them. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed... Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

Longbottom seemed liable to pass out in terror at any moment. "Relax, Longbottom," Draco sighed in his ear, getting sick of his sniffing. "Do you really think you'll run across any creature anywhere we go darker than I am?"

Longbottom took that more reassuringly than Draco meant it. "You'll protect me, Malfoy?"

"Sure," Draco groaned, hoping Severus never heard of this all-surmounting humiliation. He fell silent to consider the moon, his memory not having had so many clouds gliding in front of it. He had read and reread the summary of the night in his notebook, and the passive approach seemed just fine. All that was really required of him was complaining and running in terror, both of which happened to be specialties of his.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started," said Hagrid, emerging from his hut.

Potter looked so relieved to see Hagrid, Filch got miffed. "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy- it's into the Forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

Who did this upjumped Squib think he was scaring with all this blustering talk?

Longbottom, apparently, to judge by the faint moan he let out, before clutching onto Potter's sleeve. Draco felt his own unflappability as a distinct contrast, but that was one advantage he hadn't considered of his unique situation. It was easy to seem brave when you already knew everything that was going to happen, and that it would turn out fine if you just followed the script. "It's just the Forbidden Forest, Longbottom," Draco said, with a languid eye-roll he knew would infuriate Filch. "They wouldn't have first-years in there if it was actually life-

threatening, whatever he says. And the Forest is rather overrated, anyway. I guarantee that in ten minutes, I could find a half-dozen things more dangerous in Malfoy Manor than the Forest could ever produce, without even having to go *into* our dungeons."

Hagrid was with that horrid dog of his, carrying a crossbow. "Abou' time. I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione, Draco?"

Draco had no idea how his name had made it into that statement. He just hoped no one would go around spreading tales that Draco was acquaintances with the *gamekeeper*.

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch. "They're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" said Hagrid. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? 'Snot your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

Alright, it was pretty gratifying to watch Hagrid tell off Filch, gamekeeper or not.

"I'll be back at dawn, for what's left of them," Filch said in his singularly unthreatening way, before heading off. Merlin, how could Draco have ever found that squib menacing?

Draco hadn't written in his notes in such detail, but he distinctly remembered begging Hagrid not to take him into the forest, calling it servant stuff and threatening to tell his father. This time, he would have been disappointed if the plans had changed. Just stick to the blue loop, that was his mantra. Respect the blue loop. Fear the blue loop. Live by the blue loop. Love the blue loop-

"Right then," said Hagrid, "Now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

Despite what Draco had just told Longbottom, it did strike him as genuinely negligent, forcing students into the Forest like this, first-years at that. Hogwarts did seem extremely light when it came to child safety precautions.

Hagrid brought them to the edge of the forest and lifted his lantern to show a narrow path to them. *Unicorn blood*, Draco thought, the blue loop leaving him feeling like a seer, and was proud of himself for resisting the urge to show off and identify a second before Hagrid did. "Look there," said Hagrid, "See that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

Ah, yes, euthanizing unicorns, *the* perfect extracurricular activity for 11-year-olds.

"Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've bin staggerin' around since last night at least."

"I want Fang," Draco said quickly, remembering being paired with Longbottom and the mutt the first go around. Potter gave him a dirty glare at that. Draco had a sudden mental image of

tugging at the Gryffindor scarf around Potter's neck, and felt disgusted in himself.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid. "So me, Harry an' Hermione'll go one way an' Draco, Neville an' Fang'll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practise now- that's it- an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh- so, be careful- let's go."

Ah, yes, the well-known universal anecdote for mortal peril, *red sparks*.

It didn't make them any more effective, making them Gryffindor-colored.

Once they had taken a fork in the path, and he and Longbottom took the dog the other way from the others, Longbottom seized on his arm with a whimper. "Longbottom," Draco said firmly, "I said I would protect you, but if you insist on clinging to me like Pansy Parkinson drunk at a ball, I will not hesitate to take the dog and leave you behind."

"Right! Sorry," went Longbottom, quickly letting go of him, and off they went. At some point, though, Draco remembered scaring him as a joke, and Longbottom letting off red sparks, which drew the others and got him put with Potter. It was such a temptation to just stay with the appealingly quiet and obedient Longbottom. He was trying to reason out how the blue loop might unfold without his interference, when suddenly, Longbottom was letting off red sparks anyway.

Draco jumped, looking around frantically. "What? What? Longbottom, what is it?" He had to fight the urge to hide behind Longbottom, before remembering he had a wand and drawing it.

It seemed that without a script to follow, Draco wasn't so courageous after all.

"Look! Look!" Longbottom squeaked, and pointed to a twisted dark shape before them.

Draco squinted at it. "Longbottom," he said slowly, "You do know that's a tree, right?"

Longbottom remained frozen in terror until Draco cast a Lumos to augment their lanterns, and went up and touched the bark of the tree to show its harmlessness. "See, Longbottom?"

"It was a scary tree," Longbottom said faintly.

"Draco! Neville! Where are yeh?" Hagrid's voice sounded nearby, his bulk crunching and snapping at the forest floor.

"Over here!" Draco called. "Longbottom set off the sparks by mistake, don't worry!"

Hagrid came tearing into their part of the woods like Wormtail threatened with the Cruciatus curse. "Neville? What'd yeh do that for?"

"Sorry," Longbottom said meekly, and Draco expected Longbottom to be irritated with him as a tattletale, but as Hagrid led them with an exasperated sigh towards the others, Longbottom leaned in and whispered, "Thank you, Draco."

He was Draco now? Sweet Salazar. If Longbottom knew whose wand it was that Draco had just raised to defend him... "For what?"

"For telling Hagrid it was just a mistake," Longbottom whispered. "Not that I did it because I was scared of a tree." Draco thought Longbottom getting scared had been implicit in his phrasing, but he supposed Gryffindors needed things spelled out for them. He shrugged, more uncomfortable with a grateful Longbottom than a betrayed one. "I hate getting scared so much," Longbottom whispered. "I don't know why I got sorted into Gryffindor. I'm never any good at being brave."

The absurdity of Draco being the one to receive these inane confidences was only matched by the fortuitousness of it, as the one person in the red line with unshakable confidence in Longbottom's Gryffindor credentials. "No, you're a Gryffindor through and through, Longbottom," Draco sighed a bit enviously, imagining how sweet it must feel to slash a sword through Nagini's throat. "It'll just take you time to live up to it. But you were put there for a reason. Seriously, trust me. I know better than all you children."

They reached the clearing where Hagrid had left Potter and Granger, and Potter and Granger nobly resisted the urge to laugh as Hagrid explained. "We'll be lucky ter catch anythin' now, with the racket you boys were makin'. Right, we're changin' groups- Neville, you stay with me an' Hermione, Harry, you go with Fang an' Draco." It was the groupings Draco had wanted, although he didn't understand them this time, until he heard Hagrid whisper to Potter, "Reckon Hermione's the only one who can keep Neville calm, yeah?" Draco found himself resenting this, after genuinely making an effort to calm Longbottom, but objectively, he supposed it hadn't worked.

Potter nodded manfully, though he looked like he'd rather be conducting a search party with Umbridge as company. Not that Potter had ever met Umbridge, and might never do so if the blue loop diverged enough...

That left them heading deeper into the forest together, following the blood, while Potter made stilted conversation about upcoming exams. Ultimately, they fell into Draco verbally quizzing Potter on dates for History of Magic, until at last they were losing the path and Potter said he could see the trail of blood thickening. He pointed to some tree roots with the blood trail on them, and then a clearing behind an old oak tree as gnarled and foreboding as the one that had made Neville send up the sparks. They were here, Draco remembered, and let Potter hold him back from the sight of the bright white body. The first time, Draco had been thinking only about what had gotten the unicorn and whether it would get Draco as well. Now, he found himself looking at Potter instead of the unicorn, marveling at the depth of empathy and sorrow that seemed to shine out of them for the felled creature, even in the darkness.

Here came the hard part. A hooded figure emerged which he knew was Quirrell, and he had to fight the urge to call out questions to about their upcoming Defense exam. It was as gross as he remembered when Quirrell began to drink the unicorn blood, though. Draco scrunched up his face in disgust, before remembering he should be trying to look terrified.

Yes, he did regret his part in Dumbledore's death, but he had to say, under the Dumbledore regime, Hogwarts did need to institute some more rigorous DADA hiring policies.

Potter was hardly looking at Draco. He was transfixed by Quirrell, and when Quirrell looked back, Potter clutched his forehead and fell, staggering back and then falling to his knees. Watching Potter meant Draco missed Quirrell advancing on them, his robes covered grotesquely in the unicorn blood. Draco had missed that brief window in which he'd run away the first time. That was so like him, causing his own unnecessary death because he was watching Potter too much.

His wand had come to his hand without thinking, almost before he reached for it. Slowly, shakily, he raised it against the hooded figure he knew was Quirrell but couldn't see clearly, telling himself he was a Malfoy and a Black, and if he was going to die by the hands of the Dark Lord, it would be by the Dark Lord *proper*, restored to all his bossy snaky glory, and not some substandard Defense professor with a vampire fetish. He was less afraid than he might have been, less afraid than he ever could have expected to be, because if this was death, it was death, and that was better than Dementors. Anything was better than Dementors.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Sectum-"

And something struck him in the back of the head from above, and everything went black.

"Enervate!"

Draco awoke to four faces staring anxiously down at him, with Potter telling him, "The centaurs are very sorry."

Slowly, his addled mind pieced together that a herd of centaurs had appeared to save Potter from the hooded figure, because of course they had. In the process of leaping over the boys to drive the figure off, they'd accidentally struck Draco in the head with their hooves. "Take me to Professor Snape," was Draco's first reaction. "He'll stop it from scarring. A Malfoy can't have scars."

There was a collective series of groans above him, Granger's the most amused. "He's fine," she said, and stroked his hair softly.

Granger and Potter insisted on accompanying him and Hagrid to the hospital wing, which he found oddly touching until it became apparent they had tagged along to whisper news into his ringing ears. "The centaur Firenze said that killing a unicorn is a curse on you, and that you only have a half-life once you drink unicorn blood. He said it was someone trying to stay alive long enough to drink something, to bring him back to strength and power, with the Elixir of Life. He knows about the Philosopher's Stone, and he said it was Voldemort in the woods!"

"Don't say the name!" Granger interrupted immediately, and Draco was grateful.

"Or at least I think he said. He said he thought he never really died," Potter finished.

Draco had gotten the distinct impression it was Quirrell, but it wasn't like he was an expert in these things. "Why, Potter," he intoned, rather incoherent, but not stunned enough to not take

this chance to get something legendary off on Potter. "Not dead, is he, then? Slacking on the job that day, were we? My, my, could it be the Chosen One has been a fraud all along?"

He realized how badly he'd miscalculated when that crack led Potter to grab his tie and get in his face. "Shut up, Draco," Potter hissed. "If he isn't dead, wait and see, I'll kill him again."

"Now that's the spirit," Draco drawled, and enjoyed watching Hagrid and Granger tell Potter off for being hostile towards the wounded bloke.

Between Pomfrey and Severus, the concussion did not linger long, nor even the bruising under Draco's hair, after the level of whining Draco subjected Severus to on the subject. But the aftermath was felt long after, cutting into their concentration for exams, in Potter's new certainty that Severus was lying in wait to steal the stone for Voldemort. Granger, though, maintained that they were safe with Dumbledore around.

At least they had the invisibility cloak back, at what Potter suspected was Dumbledore's interference. That suggested Dumbledore intended to sit back, leave the Dark Lord-fighting up to the Chosen One, and eat his lemon drops. Draco chose not to share that thought.

So it was time for exams, while they waited for someone to try to steal the Stone and bring Voldemort back. Upon which, Potter had become fond of declaring to Draco, he would kill the Dark Lord again, and then Draco would see who was *slacking on the job* or a *fraud.*

You'd be six years early, Potter, but I'll take it.

Through the Trapdoor

First year exams were harder than Draco had expected. They had been terrifying the first time round, nearly paralyzed by fear he would finish in their year behind Granger and what his father would say. He expected to breeze through this time, but the written ones in that awful sweltering oven of a room were nearly as exhausting as in the blue loop. It seemed he'd been lackadaisical in his approach to studying, hardly focused for most of the weeks before exams with Potter at their table. He looked at his History of Magic exam in particular and for a long stretch could barely even remember what a goblin was. If he failed it outright, though, he would just blame it on a lingering concussion. He had done so much worse this year to anger his father than simply scoring lower on exams than a Muggleborn girl.

The practical exams were embarrassingly easy by comparison. He made Flitwick's pineapple tap dance. He made McGonagall's mouse into a snuff-box, which his extra Transfiguration work at Christmas had made an exciting task, to the point she declared his box one of the most beautiful she had ever seen in her exam- he had gone rather overboard with the African turquoise, he had to confess, but he'd been bored. And the Forgetfulness Potion for Severus was so easy he could have made both his own and Longbottom's for him, if he hadn't been too sure Severus would catch him.

Potter was a mess throughout, having nightmares about Voldemort and getting more and more paranoid. Draco did know Potter's trio would end up in some kind of danger by the end of the year, from all the house points they won last minute. So he couldn't exactly call it irrational, that paranoia. He was more irked by Granger, who emerged from her History of Magic exam hummingly content. "That was far easier than I thought it would be," she told him as she passed by in the courtyard. He nobly resisted the urge to try out the Densaugeo jinx on her.

The end of exams was strangely morbid for him, in contrast to the childish elation it gave everyone else. He realized the anxiety that had come to slowly oppress him more with each exam completed was not for his marks, but the progression in time they represented. What scared him wasn't Potter facing the Dark Lord this year. He had faith he'd managed not to mess up the blue loop too much. It should still turn out fine for his Gryffindor idiots. What bothered him was what came afterwards for himself. Facing a weakened Voldemort seemed roughly commensurate with, if not slightly edged out by, the prospect of facing his father.

He skipped the Great Hall for dinner, getting food from the house elves. He was lying in bed aimlessly tossing his wand up and down in the air, until late that night, when Theo's voice called out to him. He waved his wand to open his curtains without sitting up, looking over at Theo and wondering what sort of things Theo had written about Draco to his father over the year. Why hadn't Draco been actively threatening him and his friends against it? "If this isn't important, Theo," Draco sighed with a yawn, "I won't be pleased, you know. The attraction of seeing your face is not *quite* enough to justify disturbing my practice at blood magic."

Theo went pale, even worse at telling when Draco was joking than Weasley. "Oh, er, sorry, it's just- there's Gryffindors for you at the common room entrance. Out after curfew. And not

just one this time. Loads of them."

Draco frowned. "Why didn't you just tell on them and get them in trouble?"

"They're your friends," Theo said weakly. It was clear it was not Slytherin solidarity but fear of Draco's retribution that had kept Theo silent.

"What," Draco yawned to Potter's trio as he joined them outside the entrance, "Could possibly be important enough to justify disturbing my practice at blood magic?"

"Oh, the mystical blood magic of Dread Lord Grindelwald?" Weasley quipped, and they both burst out laughing while Potter and Granger looked disapproving.

"Draco," Granger hissed. "You weren't at dinner, and we need to talk to you. We've found out something important, and we need your help, now!"

It could not possibly be more important than reviewing shield charms for different dark curses he'd seen Father perform. "Well, I happen to be extremely busy. Don't you think I've performed more than enough charity assisting hapless Gryffindors for several lifetimes?"

"Can you for once," Potter hissed, "Shut your stupid stuck-up Slytherin mouth and *listen*?"

"Let me. He'll listen to me. So," Granger told him in her rapid way as he pulled them to a remote nook of the dungeon labyrinth. "Hagrid told a stranger about how to get past Fluffy with a lullaby when he got drunk and bought the dragon egg, a hooded one we think is after the Stone, and we tried to go to Dumbledore about it but he isn't here, he's off at the Ministry, and Professor McGonagall wouldn't listen to us. She said the Stone couldn't be stolen, but now we know it *can*, and we think the thief will go through the trapdoor tonight, because Dumbledore's missing!"

"We should tell Professor Snape," Draco said, only for the others to glare at him.

"You know we think it's him who's after it," Granger hissed, "And I tried to keep a watch on him, but I lost him, and McGonagall won't let us watch the third-floor corridor, so- so-"

"So?" Draco said, with a sinking feeling he knew what was coming.

"So," Potter said, "We're all going, right now, to get the Stone before Snape can."

"We have the invisibility cloak," Weasley said, "Even though we had to petrify Neville to get it- it's a long story, Malfoy, anyway- so we're going now!"

Draco frowned. "And you needed to tell me all this... why? What, do you need my advice? My best wishes for your endeavour? Well, good luck, all of you. I hope when they find your bodies, at least *some* of the entrails haven't been removed."

"You're coming with us," Potter said, as if there had never been a question, and pulled out the cloak like he expected Draco to get under it.

"That- that won't fit four," Draco stammered.

"It'll just be a tight fit, Draco," Granger said impatiently. "Come on, we don't have time to dawdle anymore-"

"Why," Draco said in utter disbelief, "Do you all think that I would ever in a million years *consider* accompanying you on this suicide mission?"

"We need you," Granger said, voice making it sound obvious. "You're the best in our year with curses, Frankenstein, you have all kinds of experience with complicated magic, and Snape has always seemed fond of you, maybe he'd hesitate longer to kill you than the rest of us-"

"IT'S NOT SNAPE!" Draco shrieked, loud enough half of the dungeons probably heard.

"Then why won't you come with us?" demanded Potter, and Draco crossed his arms, tongue locked from saying most of what he was thinking: *I wasn't there the first time, I'd probably ruin the blue loop and get us all killed, and also, I'm scared.* "What are you, scared to face Voldemort?"

"Don't say the name!" Draco hissed.

"Guess so," Potter sneered in that crisp pretty voice, already twice the man Malfoy had ever been, at only eleven. When he stared at Draco's mouth, Draco's lip twitched uncontrollably, because of course he was scared. Everyone had to know that, but Draco shook his head.

Potter's grip was sure on Draco's shoulders as he took them in hand. "You're going home to your father soon, aren't you, Draco? What are you, scared of him? Of what he'll say if he finds out you went against his side? He was a follower of Voldemort's, wasn't he? What, are you the same?" He held onto Draco, and Draco tried to look away but Potter wouldn't let him.

"This is ridiculous," Draco breathed. "I don't have to prove anything to you, Potter-"

"Don't you want to, though?" Potter interrupted. "Don't you want to prove you aren't like your father?" Draco froze, and Potter pressed his advantage. "This is it, Draco. Right now. Which side are you on?"

Draco had no idea. Maybe he never had.

"I don't have to answer to you," Draco said tonelessly, "I don't care what you think of me," and Potter shook his head, intensity sparking between them so much that Draco could practically feel Potter's magic brushing against his, like it was trying to push in.

"You don't scare me, Draco Malfoy," Potter whispered, breath a shiver over Draco's lips, and Draco shuddered, turning his face aside to keep from falling apart. "You don't. And you don't fool me, either." Potter's hand touched Draco's cheek, turning it back towards his Avada Kedavra eyes, and Draco saw death in them more clearly than ever before. "We all know you're coming, so stop wasting time."

Potter let go, and silently, Draco fell into step behind him. When Weasley pulled the invisibility cloak out, just managing to drape it over the four of them, Draco let it swallow

him.

They just missed Peeves going past, and a few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor- and the door was already ajar. "Well, there you are," Potter said quietly. "Snape's already got past Fluffy."

It was too much effort at that point to correct him. Draco left it, and looked forward to receiving all of their forfeits if they survived long enough to perform them.

Underneath the cloak, Potter turned to the other two. "If you want to go back, I won't blame you," he said. "You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Alright, Potter, thank you," Draco began, only for Potter to roll his eyes.

"Not *you*," Potter said, "You're coming, I mean those two," but Weasley and Granger seemed as annoyed to be potentially sent away as Draco had been relieved.

"Don't be stupid," said Weasley.

"We're coming," said Granger.

Potter led them into the corridor. As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. And then Draco saw some hideous mass of flesh masquerading as a dog, as tall as the Mirror of Erised, with three pairs of rolling, mad eyes, three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs, and three noses that sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn't see them. The sight of it made Draco almost cry out, before Potter put a hand over his mouth.

"What is that thing?" Draco hissed, and the others seemed surprised to remember he'd never seen it before.

"Fluffy," Weasley offered helpfully.

"What's that at its feet?' Granger whispered.

"Looks like a harp," said Ron. "Snape must have left it there."

"It must wake up the moment you stop playing," said Harry. "Well, here goes..."

He put Hagrid's flute to his lips and blew. It wasn't really a tune, but from the first note the beast's eyes began to droop. Draco supposed there was no accounting for taste. Slowly, the dog's growls ceased- it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

"Keep playing," Weasley warned Potter as they slipped out of the cloak, Potter taking Draco's hand to pull him with them towards the trapdoor. The dog's breath made Draco shudder in revulsion as they approached its heads.

"I think we'll be able to pull the door open," said Ron, peering over the dog's back. "Want to go first, Hermione?"

"No, I don't!"

"All right." Draco halfway expected them to make the Slytherin go first, but Weasley gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog's legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

"What can you see?" Granger said anxiously.

"Nothing- just black- there's no way of climbing down, we'll just have to drop."

"Or," Draco said irritably, "We could use magic." They looked at him blankly. "Come on, then, I'll levitate you inside."

"That'll take too long, the dog is going to wake up," Potter said, handing the flute to Granger, and with a yelp, Draco found himself pulled down with him through the trapdoor. Hurtling, falling, and then a thump, falling on what felt like a plant. He was still screaming when Potter shook him. "Draco, we're fine! Be quiet so they can hear me! It's okay, it's a soft landing, you can jump!"

"What is this plant?" Draco gasped suspiciously. A childhood at Malfoy Manor had taught him not to trust mysterious plants any more than mysterious wands.

But Weasley came flying down right away, as ordered, and landed sprawled next to Harry.

"What's this stuff?" were his first words.

"Dunno, sort of plant thing. I suppose it's here to break the fall. Come on, Hermione!"

"What is wrong with you Gryffindors? Before we're all down on it, we should figure out with this plant *is*-"

Granger had already jumped. She landed by Draco's side, and her presence made him feel calmer, despite his dislike of leaping before looking. He reached out and touched her hand, feeling his fingers brush over turquoises. "You're wearing this down into mortal peril?"

Granger pulled her wrist to her defensively. "I read," she said primly, "That turquoises give mental clarity. And *someone's* got to have that. We could hear you yelling from up here."

"Yeah," Weasley added helpfully. "You were so loud we were scared you'd wake the dog."

"My ears are still ringing," Potter complained, and Granger looked around thoughtfully.

"We must be miles under the school," she said.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Weasley, but Draco felt a creeping sensation along his knee.

Granger leapt up and struggled towards a damp wall. She had to, because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snake-like tendrils around her ankles. As for the boys, their legs had already been bound in long creepers without them noticing.

Oh, no, Draco, it's fine*, don't worry about the mysterious unidentified plant under a trapdoor enchanted to guard against intruders. We're* Gryffindors*, we can* never *die.*

"I told you there was something wrong with the plant!" Draco whined.

"Shut up, Draco!" Potter yelled back. "Maybe we would have figured it out if you hadn't been screaming your head off!"

Granger had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her, because apparently they were four instead of three but still only had one working brain amongst them. Now she watched in horror as the three boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"Stop moving!" Granger ordered them. "I know what this is- it's Devil's Snare!"

Draco had no idea what that was. It sounded like one of the deeper dungeons in Malfoy Manor. "Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Weasley, leaning back, trying to stop the plant curling around his neck.

"Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Granger. Draco pulled out his wand and held his arm high, trying to keep it free of the tendrils and think of a spell, but his brain seemed to have shut down.

"Well, hurry up, I can't breathe!" Potter gasped, and Draco felt a sudden urgency he hadn't at feeling his own limbs be ensnared.

"Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare... What did Professor Sprout say? It likes the dark and the damp-"

"So light a fire!" Potter choked, and Draco found his arm had gone immobile from vines, before he had gotten himself together enough to use it. Oh, yes, he was proving invaluable indeed.

"Yes- of course- but there's no wood!" Granger cried, wringing her hands.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron bellowed. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?"

Draco burst out laughing hysterically as Granger went, "Oh, right," and then whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant. In a matter of seconds, the three boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unravelled itself from their bodies and they were able to pull free.

"Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione," said Potter as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

"Yeah," said Weasley, "And lucky Harry doesn't lose his head in a crisis- 'There's no wood', honestly. You alright there, Malfoy?" Draco was gingerly attempting to extract his wand from a pit of mud. Once he had, he tried to think of how to cast a Scourgify on itself, then groaned,

made a face, and shoved it into his pocket anyway. "Sorry we didn't listen to you about the plants."

"Not much use of me being along if you don't listen anyway, huh?" Draco sniped at Potter.

Potter turned to glare at Draco, rather than look down the stone passageway ahead of them. "Oh, I don't know, Draco, do you think that instead of just whining at everyone else, maybe the best wizard in our year at casting spells could have, I don't know, *cast a spell*?"

"*Boys*," said Granger automatically, and pointed them forward.

There was water dripping down the walls, and Draco could feel the anxiety slowly mounting in his chest to the rhythm of that sound, until Weasley startled him and he nearly tripped over his own feet. "Can you hear something?" Weasley whispered, and Draco would have cussed him out, but he was right. There was some kind of rustling and clinking up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter, ghosts make terrible guards-"

"Sounds like wings to me."

"There's light ahead- I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy, wooden door.

"Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" said Weasley.

"What use are they if they don't?" Draco sniped.

"So probably," said Harry. "They don't look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once... Well, there's nothing for it... I'll run."

Better him than me.

Potter took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He reached the door untouched, and pulled the handle, but it was locked.

Reluctantly, Draco followed, though he wasn't entirely convinced that a creature wouldn't leave Potter unscathed and still go headlong for Draco Malfoy. But the birds ignored him as well, and he reached the other side, standing to watch Potter and Weasley tug and heave at the door. It wouldn't budge, not even when Granger tried her Alohomora Charm. "Do you know any other unlocking spells, Draco?" she asked.

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Most of them involve blood," he said, and Weasley snorted. "Don't think any of ours would qualify." Except maybe Draco's blood, but this set-up with the birds looked nothing like something Severus would make.

"Now what?" said Weasley.

"These birds... they can't be here just for decoration," said Granger. Draco stared up at them vacantly, wishing he had paid more attention in Care of Magical Creatures, instead of just whispering uncreative insults about Hagrid to Vince and Greg.

"They're not birds!" Potter said suddenly, "They're keys! Winged keys- look carefully. So that must mean..." He looked around while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "Yes- look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

Something like Quidditch? That was almost suspiciously well-suited to Potter's skill set.

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Weasley examined the lock on the door. "We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one- probably silver, like the handle."

They seized a broomstick each and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one. Draco's trained Seeker reflexes let him grab a couple in his palm, but when he flew over to show them to Weasley, he shook his head each time.

Potter, though, was naturally the one to figure out the Quidditch task. It probably took him even less time than it had for him to catch the Snitch in that five-minute Hufflepuff match. "That one!" Potter called, pointing. "That big one- there- no, there- with bright blue wings- the feathers are all crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling and nearly fell off his broom. "Weasley, calm down!" Draco yelled. "Potter will get it!"

"No," Potter called over with annoyance in his voice, "You're going to help me, Draco! You go over it, Ron and Hermione below, stay below and stop it going down, and then I'll catch it. Right, NOW!"

Twelve-year-old Weasley wasn't much of a flier yet, Granger less so, but they still reacted more quickly to Potter's command than Draco. A moment after they flew into position, Draco sped over where Potter had commanded as well, embarrassment overshadowed by fear that his presence was an impediment to the blue loop's success. Potter was after it quickly, though, and with just as much as ease as he always seemed to win against Draco, pinned the key against the wall. Weasley and Granger cheered from below. After a moment, Draco cheered gingerly too, as if he had contributed anything more than freezing up.

It was what he always did with danger, freeze up if not outright flee. He didn't think he had in the Forbidden Forest, but the centaurs had saved him before he would ever know, and now he could see his own true colors. With meticulous planning, he could accomplish things, like with the Vanishing Cabinet, but in heat-of-the-moment confrontation, he was worse than useless. The passive approach had suited him best, because that was what he was- *passive*, like when he had stood watching Dumbledore on the tower, unable to kill him *or* go against the Death Eaters, just waiting for other people to make the decisions. And so the people

around him got hurt, got *killed*, while somehow Draco lived and lived, chance after chance, and when would it stop?

Draco landed at the same time as the others, trying to push away his maudlin self-laceration. Potter was clearly thinking of nothing but the task at hand, jamming the struggling key into the lock. It escaped him as soon as the door opened, like a Snitch less grateful than their kind usually were for their overlord Potter to have graced them with his touch.

"Ready?" Potter asked them, and when Draco forced himself to nod along with the others, Potter opened the door.

The dark room came alight to the sight of a larger-than-life sized chessboard, and Merlin, Draco had always hated chess. Father had tried so many times to tutor him in it, calling it an early pathway to strategic thinking, but it just made his head hurt. It began to hurt again at the mere sight of tall black stone chessmen nearby, and worse at the sight of the white chessmen facing theirs without faces at all. "Now what do we do?" Potter whispered.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Weasley. "We've got to play our way across the room."

There was another door behind the white pieces. It was all like some macabre version of a children's game. The only real question was whether death awaited for anyone who lost.

"How?" said Granger nervously, and impulsively, Draco reached out and squeezed her hand. He told himself it was for her, even though he knew it was him who needed the reassurance.

"I think," said Weasley, "We're going to have to be chessmen."

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight's horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Weasley.

"Do we- er- have to join you to get across?"

The black knight nodded. Weasley turned to the other two.

"This wants thinking about..." he said. "I suppose we've got to take the place of four of the black pieces..."

They stayed quiet, watching Weasley think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but Harry, Hermione, neither of you are that good at chess- Malfoy, I don't know if you-"

"I'm awful," Draco said quickly. Father had said any of their house elves could give him a run for his money. "You do it, Weasley."

"We're not offended," said Potter quickly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, Malfoy, you take the place of that first pawn on the left, and Hermione, you go there instead of that castle."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be a knight," said Weasley. Even with the mounting terror building layer over layer over him, Draco had to roll his eyes.

"Of course. The gallant Sir Ronald the Redhead. See, that's something none of your brothers can say, is it? Have any of them ever been a knight?" Draco jibed.

Instead of sniping back, a slow smile spread across Weasley face. "No. No, I suppose they haven't."

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words, a knight, a bishop, a castle, and a pawn turned their backs on the white pieces, and walked off the board leaving four empty squares for them to take.

"White always plays first in chess," said Ron, peering across the board. "Yes... look..."

A white pawn had moved forward two squares. Ron told Draco to move forward to counter it, and though he found himself regretting every single choice that had led him to putting his life at the hands of the intelligence of a Weasley, he obeyed.

They all moved silently wherever Weasley sent them. Draco managed to tell himself it was going well until their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay very still, face down.

"Had to let that happen," said Weasley, looking shaken. "Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on."

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall, leaving Draco thinking bleakly about how that posture would look on a human body, his own or worse, Potter's. Twice, Weasley only just noticed in time that they were in danger. He himself darted around the board taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

"We're nearly there," he muttered suddenly. "Let me think- let me think..."

The white queen turned her blank face towards him.

"Yes..." said Ron softly, "It's the only way... I've got to be taken."

"NO!" Harry and Hermione shouted, and Draco knew at that moment that he and his presence had ruined it. There had only been three human pieces for Weasley to worry about the first time, so he must have won the game cleanly. After all, they all survived, coming out the other side cheering smarmily for Gryffindor as they won the cup. But with Draco as one too many, too much dead weight for Weasley to carry, the first sacrifice to the red line had come: Ronald Weasley.

"That's chess!" snapped Weasley, while Draco looked around frantically to try and see if Weasley had missed any possible moves. "You've got to make some sacrifices! I'll make my move and she'll take me- that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!"

"But-"

"*Gryffindors*," Draco interrupted, shaking his head. He put on his best air of false confidence to make them listen, because no matter what happened going forward, Weasley could not be sacrificed. If he died, if any of the three died, any dream of the victory from the blue loop died with them. "Listen to yourselves. Before we start martyring ourselves, has it occurred to any of you to question whether one might substitute a human for a piece on the board?"

Granger looked around quickly, only to pale further. "No, Draco, look, even if we could, there's no other knight on the board." She looked over at the felled black pieces along the wall, which showed no signs of ever returning to life and being able to be ordered. If they could have, Draco supposed, nothing would have theoretically stopped a player from running over, getting the lost piece, and pulling it right back beside where it had been taken from on the board. That was, if they could leave the board at all.

"And no other piece moves like a knight?" Potter asked Weasley, though he seemed to know even before Weasley nodded.

"Weasley isn't a knight," Draco said crossly, "He's a human. He's in the position of a knight, because- could another human switch places with him, take the tile for a knight, and move as a knight?" The trio exchanged confused stares. Draco felt like he was slipping outside his body already as he walked sideways from his place to Weasley's in a languid stroll, walking out of his skin to stand watching a memory in a Pensieve that belonged to someone more deserving. The board didn't seem to register his motion sideways as a legitimate move, because pawns couldn't move that way. Nor, he knew, could knights move purely sideways without a diagonal. He didn't know if it would work. But he knew what he meant to do, which was more than could be said for the others.

"Draco," Weasley said, gaping at him as Draco stepped onto his tile. "Why are you here?" It had been a gamble just leaving his tile, with the off-chance it could mean forfeiting the game or being killed at once. Once he was allowed to reach Weasley, though, something in him told him the switch would work.

"Why does it look like, Weasley?" Draco asked impatiently, sneering at him. "Are you being deliberately slow? Go to my tile." Weasley didn't move. "You can substitute a human for a human, it seems. Go be a pawn. No title, Sir Ronald, but better life expectancy."

"Draco!" Granger yelled, strident and tearful. "What are you *doing*?"

It was like he hadn't just answered that. "Taking Weasley's place," he said, very deliberately, as if the Gryffindors were so stupid he had to enunciate each syllable individually for them to understand. "Have you lost the ability to speak the language? Go on, then, aren't you all desperate to stop the Stone being taken? Keep wasting time being sentimental and it'll be gone."

"Draco," Weasley said, staring at him in their shared tile, his ruddy twelve-year-old face unable to comprehend what was happening. "Are you trying to sacrifice yourself instead of me?"

"It only makes sense," Draco snapped, before turning to glare at a frozen Potter and Granger. "You need him. You don't need me."

"That's not true!" Granger yelled. Slowly, as if in a dream, Draco watched the fall of a tear down her face, like someone other than Draco Malfoy was about to die.

"Weasley," Draco said, "I'm useless and you know it. I'm no good at any of this heroic bit, I just freeze up. Potter needs *you*, so don't be stupid. It's the three of you. It's always going to be the three of you. So take my spot, call the play, and win the game. And if you stick around wasting time once it's won, I'll cheer from the afterlife when Quirrell drinks your blood. Well?"

"But Draco," Ron said, face a mask of horror. "You don't even *like* me."

"I don't even like any of you," Draco said, and shoved him off the tile.

Stumbling, ashen-faced, Weasley took the tile Draco had vacated.

"Draco," Potter called from behind him. "Draco, listen- I have to tell you-"

"Shut up, Potter," said Draco, and faced forward.

He stepped two forward, one diagonal. And then the white queen sprung forward. The last thing he heard was Granger's scream before the stone arm struck.

The House Cup

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even when Draco made a noble sacrifice at risk of his life, trust Potter to go and upstage him anyway.

He woke up alone, but his yelling drew the attention of Madam Pomfrey, who hissed at him to hush or he might wake the Potter boy. "One would expect you to endorse the prospect of Draco waking him," said the best voice in the world, "Given the likelihood Potter will never wake at all."

"Severus!" Draco cried out, forgetting all his reserve. He managed to sit up in bed, though his head spun with the effort. "Severus, you're here! You're alive! *I'm* alive!" He blinked rapidly. "Is Potter not alive?"

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said, "Has been through quite an ordeal. As have you, Mr. Malfoy. And he has not yet woken, but he will." She didn't sound confident, but Draco remembered Potter gone for a couple days at the end of term in the blue loop. He remembered well his own consternation at Potter's appearance just in time to watch Gryffindor win the House Cup. He would greet news of Potter's recovery differently this time around.

"I bet him it wasn't you," Draco called contentedly to Severus. "So I won. He's going to be so miserable I won." Severus came to sit by Draco's bedside, and Draco saw he was wearing the dragon Ouroboros ring. "Lovely ring," Draco said weakly. "Whoever made it for you... must have had exquisite taste."

"I'll leave you with your godson," Pomfrey said. Draco hoped Potter wasn't awake in time to hear that part. And then she left him with Severus, and Draco flung himself forward to hug him, because he had almost died and Severus couldn't hex him for it now. He even got two stiff pats to the back before Severus delicately extricated himself from Draco's arms.

"There, there," Severus said awkwardly. "You're not going to die." He frowned, seeing Draco still fearful. "And you're not going to have any scars, either." He seemed surprised to see even that not ease the tension on Draco's face. "And all your little friends will be fine. Granger and Weasley survive to be insufferable another day. And so, one regrets to say, will Potter."

"I thought I was going to die," Draco said, hearing how stupid he sounded, but still only half-lucid. "So, the Dark Lord, did Potter stop him?"

Severus frowned, then slowly turned to level Draco with the most unimpressed stare he had ever given him. "Draco Lucius Malfoy. Do not tell me you deliberately put yourself in peril to help *Harry Potter.*" Draco shrugged weakly. "And what are these reports I hear, hmm, of you changing places in a chess game with Mr. Weasley, to save him from taking the role of a sacrifice? Have you lost your wits? Is St. Mungo's looming in your future?"

Draco felt his lower lip curl up unpleasantly. His head didn't even ache. He didn't know how long he'd been out, but between Severus and Pomfrey, they seemed to have done an exemplary job fixing him. He had been more sore after the centaur hoof. "It only made sense, sir. The three of them, they matter. But it's not like anyone would care if *I* was gone."

Severus stared at him unreadably, and then reached out and seized one of Draco's shoulders almost painfully tightly. "Do *not*," Severus said, with acidic forcefulness in every syllable, "Continue to operate under so ludicrous a delusion as *that,* Draco Malfoy."

They stared at each other, and Draco felt tears threaten to well up, before Severus let go of his shoulder and cleared his throat. He seemed embarrassed by his own show of sentimentality. "Weasley and Granger have been making a nuisance of themselves, asking for you as well as Potter," he added, as if that had been his only meaning.

"Did you find my wand?" Draco asked. Severus produced the talon wand from his pocket with a sigh.

"You may well have been better rid of it, Draco," Severus intoned, "But yes, for better or worse, it was found."

Draco beamed as he took it from Severus, feeling a thrumming of rightness go through him as the hilt fit cleanly into his hand. He found himself glad he had survived. "What day is it?"

"It is the night," Severus informed him, "Of the sixth. You have been asleep since you were recovered last night. You will stay tonight, no arguments. No doubt the Gryffindors will be sniffing around here asking after you tomorrow morning. And you may be pleased to know, or perhaps not, that in Potter's absence tonight, Gryffindor has lost their match with Ravenclaw."

Severus thought Slytherin had the House Cup in the bag now. Draco didn't have the heart to disabuse him of that notion. "Good of Potter to stay in a coma for it. I suppose he can be allowed out of it now, hmm?" Draco realized how much he'd sounded like Severus after he spoke, but that only earned him a ghost of a smile. "Sir, you never told me. What happened with the Dark Lord?"

"He did not get the Stone, as you must have gathered. But you will surely soon hear the story in more detail from your little friends." Severus frowned at the face Draco made. "What, boy? You told me on the first day of term that you had no friends. Do you still hold that to be true?"

Draco was starting to tire, but it seemed important he explain the state of affairs properly. "Granger is my friend," he explained with a yawn, "Because she's intelligent. Potter and Weasley aren't *my* friends, they're just her hangers-on. Study partners."

Severus actually let out a short bark of laughter at that. "Get some rest, Draco. There will be more than enough time to wander about imperiling yourself and upsetting your elders tomorrow."

"Professor Snape, sir?" Draco called, as Severus began to leave, and Severus turned back.

"Yes?"

"Is there any way..." Draco tried to look as pathetic as possible. "Any way I could stay over the summer with *you*, sir? You *are* my godfather."

"Much to my eternal inconvenience," Severus grumbled, and turned back to give him a wan look. "Oh, don't make that face, boy. If your father's tongue proves overly unkind in the weeks to follow, I do believe you might know a curse to stop it running."

"*Draco*!"

Draco's breakfast of eggs and bacon was unceremoniously taken from him, when it was knocked from his hands by a hurtling Granger. She flung herself into his arms with a garbled shriek. Weasley followed, hovering awkwardly over his sickbed with a hand raised in greeting. "Hey, uh, looks like the bacon stayed on the plate, mate." He picked it up and put it back on the table beside Draco, making a face. "Doesn't look like the eggs survived Hermione, though."

"Oh, Draco! We were so worried!" Weasley made a snorting noise and Granger gave him a pointed look, then turned back to Draco without missing a beat. "I thought you were *dead*, Frankenstein!" she sniffled, and hugged him tightly to her again.

Draco pulled back from her to regard her seriously. "Tell me what happened. Tell me everything."

He got roughly the whole story then, though the parts after Harry had left them behind at the Potions puzzle were just what they had pieced together from talking to Dumbledore. They talked and talked until the sun was high in the sky outside the hospital window, and Draco had to forcibly shoo them off. "Go on, Granger. Even if exams are done, you know you'll be missing the library. I'll be back there soon before term is over."

"You'd think," Granger sighed, giving him a judgmental look, "After we nearly all died together, even you would have to admit we'd crossed the threshold past which any normal civilized person would have begun to use each other's *first names*."

Draco groaned, rolling his eyes. It was too much effort to put up with her nagging about it anymore. "Alright, then. You can be Hermione. But just you."

She looked to be barely resisting the urge to crush him in yet another hug. *Hermione* wanted to hug him, he tried out in his head. It sounded as foreign as the backwards letters on the Mirror of Erised. But those had proved decipherable.

"Hermione," he said, "Will you leave the poor convalescing Slytherin in peace?"

"What about me?" said Weasley crossly. "You're Draco to *me* now. And she's the only Granger at Hogwarts, but there's loads of Weasleys. There'll be my sister next year as well. Really doesn't make sense for you not to call me Ron."

Draco closed his eyes. "Fine. You're right, there are too many of your family for it not to be a matter of practicality. I will refer to the two of you by first names henceforth, but on one condition." He paused to make sure they were listening. "That you both accept that under no circumstances, come what may, I will never so long as I have life in me refer to Potter as *Harry.*"

They exchanged glances. "Alright, mate," said Ron, while Hermione sighed something to herself that sounded like *Boys.* "Listen, er, Hermione, you think maybe I could have a moment with just me and Draco now? I'll catch up with you."

"Oh, alright," Hermione said, and left them alone. When it was just them, Draco found himself the object of the most discomfiting stare he had yet received in the red line.

"Why'd you do it, Draco?" Ron asked finally, and Draco was quiet, though he knew what he meant. "Why did you take my place on that chessboard?"

It was objectively disgraceful. A Malfoy for a *Weasley*. It was a trade that never would have made sense throughout history, let alone now. But it had. It still did. It more than made sense.

Draco couldn't give Ron the full answer, but he didn't have to lie, either. "Isn't it obvious?" he asked, feeling suddenly very old. "I told you already on Halloween. You're Harry Potter's best friend. He chose you. That makes you special. He needs you. And he's going to need you for everything that's to come. This isn't going to be the end of it, Ron. This isn't going to be the last time people try to bring the Dark Lord back. And they're going to come for Potter, because he's the Boy Who Lived. Because of what he represents, and there's no changing that. Even if he wants to. So he'll need you. And you have to be there by his side."

"And what about you? Aren't we going to need you too?"

Draco let out a harsh snort. "Oh, come off it, Ron. *You* understand. Potter and Granger- I mean, *Hermione*- they're new to our world, but you're not. You're a pureblood, even if your family isn't in the Sacred Twenty Eight anymore. You know the way that world works. You know what a disappointment I am to my family in every possible way. I'll be lucky if I *make* it to a second year at Hogwarts."

Ron's gaze went unexpectedly serious in turn. "Draco," he said slowly, "If you're in trouble, you have to tell us. If your family- your father-" There was fear in his eyes, but a Gryffindor resolve that looked no weaker than in his 18-year-old self. "If you need us, we'll help you. The three of us. Just send word and we'll figure something out. My family-"

"Don't pity me, Ron," Draco said sharply. "That's the one thing I want less than anything. Not just from you, from anyone. I don't want anyone ever to pity me."

"You don't have to be so proud, you know," Ron said quietly, a measure of dismay mixing with the pity on his face.

Draco spread his arms wide. "Pride. What else do I have?" he asked with the bitterest of irony, only for Weasley to laugh and say with a shrug,

"I don't know. Us?"

It was only after Potter woke up, and they were rushing to the hospital wing, that Ron and Hermione remembered the bet about Snape and Quirrell. "Bloody hell," Ron said, faltering in his step. "Draco's gonna make us all do our forfeits now that Harry's alright, isn't he?"

Hermione's pained look made Draco feel uncharacteristically merciful. "Oh, not you two," he drawled. "I don't need your praise. What use is there being told something I already know? We'll tell Potter you did yours before he woke up."

"That's really big of you, Draco. I suppose you're going to let Harry off as well?" Hermione asked earnestly.

Draco looked at her like she had finally flipped her lid. "Have you ever *met* me, Hermione?"

It was the first thing Draco said to the Boy Who Lived, as the three of them walked up to the sickbed that could have been his deathbed. "*Harry!"* Hermione shrieked, and almost flung herself on Potter as she had Draco, before seeing his more bedraggled state and seeming to think better of it. "Oh, Harry, we were sure you were going to- Dumbledore was so worried-"

"Draco," Harry interrupted, staring up fiercely at where Draco was lingering a step away from them. "Is that you?" He put back on his glasses to look him over. "You don't look hurt at all. I thought-"

"Sorry to disappoint," Draco drawled, "But in lieu of my untimely death, Potter, you will indeed be spending your last day of first year as a Slytherin."

None of the consternation registered in Potter's face that Draco expected. "I thought you might be dead. Don't ever do that again, Draco."

"Oh, no worries," Draco said nonchalantly, "Next time I'll just let the ginger kick the bucket," and he and Ron embarked on a wave of childish shoving that made Hermione impatiently clear her throat while Potter smiled.

"Oh, Harry, I can't wait any longer, tell us what really happened," Hermione pleaded, and Potter told them everything. Draco's heart went colder at the mentions of the Mirror of Erised, but otherwise, it was much as he had imagined. He obliged Potter by joining in on Ron and Hermione's gasps and screams, though, except for when Potter told them what was under Quirrell's turban, and Draco couldn't resist putting in a smug "I told you so."

Potter glared at him, and it was all too much of a relief, to feel that scowling intensity turned on him again. "You were always so sure it wasn't Snape, weren't you."

"That," Draco said, "Is because I am in possession of a brain, but I do pity you the lack of one, Potter. Perhaps with your most recent act of heroism, your public will be moved, and we can all put in a collection to purchase you one."

"So the Stone's gone?" said Ron finally. "Flamel's just going to die?"

"That's what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that- what was it?- 'To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure'."

"I always said he was off his rocker," said Ron, looking impressed, while Draco had to stifle a laugh at the contrast with a certain other powerful wizard of their times. Granted, of all the things said in Draco's recollection of Voldemort's mind or lack thereof, *well-organized* had never been one.

"So what happened to you three?" said Potter.

"Well, we got back all right," said Hermione. "We managed to get Draco out- that took a while, but we used the Featherlight charm Draco taught me- and we were dashing up to the Owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the Entrance Hall. He already knew- he just said, 'Harry's gone after him, hasn't he?' and hurtled off to the third floor." In the process of which, Draco assumed, he had remained a Featherlight dead weight.

"D'you think he meant you to do it?" Ron said to Potter. "Sending you your father's cloak and everything?"

"He obviously did," said Draco. "This was all set up too conveniently not to be by design." It was downright un-Gryffindorish of the old bastard, really.

"Well," Hermione exploded, "If he did- I mean to say- that's terrible- you could have been killed."

"No, it isn't," said Harry thoughtfully. "He's a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident he let me find out how the Mirror worked. It’s almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could..."

"Yeah, Dumbledore's barking, all right," said Ron proudly, while Hermione leaned over and privately whispered to Draco that Muggles would never tolerate such child endangerment by educational figures. Upon which Draco, disturbingly enough, had to side with the Muggles.

"Listen," Ron went on, "You've got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course-"

Oh, if only. But Draco was prepared for the blow to fall this time. He could take it, he had resolved, in a philosophical light, just as Ron seemed to be doing now. He would not show less emotional control than a Weasley.

"You missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you- but the food'll be good."

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over. "You've had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT," she said firmly.

Draco's housemates were all jubilant, as they came in to find the Great Hall draped in green and silver, and the serpent banner hanging behind the High Table. Draco wondered if Severus already knew what was coming or could guess, or if he was about to be blindsided the way Draco had been. He hoped it would not make it sting more for Severus, that the great deeds Gryffindor were about to be rewarded for, were enabled by his own traitorous godson. But he had seen Severus wearing his ring as he passed him on the way in. It Draco was in good favor, if Severus didn't just mean to hurl it at Draco's feet in dramatic disgrace after Draco's Gryffindor-coddling cost them the Cup. Unfortunately, Draco's only real defense to any such charges was one that would lock his tongue before he could speak it.

Potter was late, which made Draco anxious instead of pleased. He kept sneaking glances over at Ron and Hermione, only for a hush to fall that announced the arrival of the famous Chosen One. Draco's fellow Slytherins began to whisper darkly, making speculations about recent events that they probably knew Draco could answer. But none of them dared ask.

Dumbledore arrived moments later, and another hush fell. "Another year gone!" he said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts...

"Now, as I understand it, the House Cup here needs awarding and the points stand thus: in fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw have four hundred and twenty-six; and Slytherin, four hundred and fifty-two."

Draco saw his fellow Slytherins burst out in cheering and stamping and goblet-banging. He made himself clap, trying not to wince at the bait-and-switch he knew was about to come. He was starting to wish he had warned Severus, if his tongue would have even let him.

"Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

Draco could feel the tension in the air as Vince quickly stopped banging his plates together.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes... First- to Mr. Ronald Weasley..."

Draco had written this down in his notebook, finding the memory in his head with little difficulty. He remembered nearly every bitter word.

"...For the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Draco rolled his eyes and stared down at his hands, beginning to pick at his fingernails as Gryffindor cheered. He heard Peter Weasley telling the other prefects, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

Apparently word of their exploits had spread farther than Draco had known. Maybe Ron's awful Prefect brother would stop lording so much over him now.

"Second- to Miss Hermione Granger... for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Draco looked over with a reluctant fondness to see Hermione in tears, and felt the impending defeat as something at least slightly bittersweet instead of just bitter.

"Third- to Mr. Harry Potter..." said Dumbledore. The room couldn't have been more silent. "...For pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

And there it was, four hundred and seventy-two points. Earlier than the last time, with the twenty points Draco had lost Slytherin helping with that bloody dragon taking Slytherin down this time to only four hundred and fifty-two. He could feel the stares on him aware of him as the root of their loss, though he could have told them it wouldn't have mattered. Any admonitions directed towards Draco, though, were swallowed up by the seismic roar that burst out, not just from Gryffindor but the other two. Would Dumbledore even bother to give that cursory ten final points to Longbottom? Draco had always suspected those had just been token points to dramatically finish with giving Gryffindor the prize.

Dumbledore did bother. He raised his hand and waited for silence before continuing. "There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

A part of Draco almost wanted to clap. *See, Longbottom,* he thought ruefully, *I told you that you were really a Gryffindor.*

Another roar erupted. Draco was only waiting for it to be over, keeping his gaze resolutely lowered, so he wouldn't have to watch that hideous sight of green banners giving way to red. But Dumbledore gave no sign he was finished yet.

"And lastly," Dumbledore said, in the same calm clear tone ringing out over all their heads, "For selfless courage in the face of death, I award seventy points to Mr. Draco Malfoy."

Draco looked up, not trusting his ears. He only began to believe them when Dumbledore declared the House Cup therefore remained with Slytherin, and the feast began, with the hall still covered in green.

Green looked good on Harry Potter. Not only did it match his eyes, but the silver in the Slytherin tie brought out a certain aristocratic tinge to his features absent against the more vulgar gold of Gryffindor. Draco straightened Potter's tie without any attempt to hide the snide glee on his face, amusement only matched by Ron's wheezing chuckles in the face Potter's utter desolation.

"He's not actually going to make me go out and wear this in front of everyone," Potter said wincingly to Hermione. "Please tell me he isn't actually going to go through with this."

Draco took more time finishing Potter's Slytherin tie than he had to, before straightening the dark green collar of Potter's robe and not bothering to hide his admiration for the picture Potter made, for once. He would think it for the Slytherin apparel only. "Perhaps I would have changed my mind, Potter, should your appearance have too gravely profaned our noble colors. But instead... I find Slytherin rather suits you."

Hermione looked at Draco rather severely, thinking him solely speaking in mockery, though she could hardly muster much consternation. She had been floating on air since exam results came out, when not only Ron and Potter passed with good marks but Longbottom came in just over the line, Severus's best efforts notwithstanding. But even Draco's better than perfect scores in Transfiguration and Potions had not been enough to unseat Hermione from her new throne at the top of the year, with not only a perfect score against his mediocre History of Magic marks, but a hundred and twelve percent in Charms, which she had still failed to explain to him. But Draco hadn't been bitter to have his nearly 19-year-old brain beaten by a 12-year-old's.

Much.

"Come on, Hermione, he's lucky I didn't make him do this the last full day of term," Draco laughed. "Everyone isn't even going to see him on the Hogwarts Express."

"No, they will," Ron crowed, "You're never living this down, mate," and was the first to call attention to Potter when they finally emerged from the abandoned classroom where Potter had swapped his robes for a pair of Draco's. Finnigan and Thomas nearly fell over laughing at the sight, which was nothing to the satisfaction it put on the faces of Vince and Greg, who did fall over, and down a few stairs, but nothing they couldn't happily walk off.

Draco stared back up at the Thestrals in the sky as their boat took the four of them back across the lake. "Look," he said, nudging Potter, "You should be able to see them now."

"What?" Potter asked blankly, despite Draco being pretty sure he'd killed Quirrell, but there was no accounting for Gryffindors. They probably had to have a symphony orchestra worth of people bite it right in front of them for them to register they'd witnessed a death.

"Nothing," Draco sighed, and reached over to tug at Potter's Slytherin tie a little more, just for his own satisfaction. "I wasn't lying, you know, Potter. You really would have looked perfect as a Slytherin, even if you didn't fit the part."

Potter flinched, then cast a nervous look at Ron and Hermione bickering in front of the boat before leaning over and whispering, "I was almost sorted Slytherin, you know."

"What?" Draco hissed, so loud Potter once again had to cover his mouth.

"It's true," Potter said grudgingly. "It said I had a thirst to prove myself, and that I could be great, and Slytherin could help me on to great things. It tried to talk me into it. But I just kept asking the hat not to, and eventually, it gave in."

Draco tried not to show the twisting feeling that put into his chest. "Well, that's nothing special, Potter," he said loftily, trying for a laugh. "The hat told *me* something far more interesting, you know, about my suitability for the houses. What was it? Oh, yes, that I lacked the courage of Gryffindor, the discernment and clear thought of Ravenclaw, the faith and good-heartedness of Hufflepuff, or the ruthlessness of Slytherin."

"Are you making that up?" Potter asked quietly, "Because that's not you," and Draco had to swear, if Potter gave him that shy little smile one more time, he was flinging himself from this boat.

Longbottom sat with them in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express, bemused by Draco's declaration that he was hands-down his favorite Gryffindor. Ron and Hermione's huffy reactions were quickly upstaged by Potter's sputtering fury. "Now, now, Potter," Draco drawled, smoothing a hand over the snake crest on Potter's chest. "That doesn't include you at the moment, remember. Until tomorrow, you're a Slytherin."

Draco considered trying to shake the others when leaving the platform, maybe even falsely insert himself to be seen in a mass of Slytherins, but there didn't seem much point, based on what his parents surely already knew. He went with the Gryffindors as they were beckoned out in twos and threes, and regretted it instantly when he saw the wizened old woman waiting to affectionately enfold Longbottom in her arms. His wand felt like it burned in his pocket. But he obligingly waved goodbye to Longbottom and his gran before watching them leave the platform.

They walked further past the gateway, and there was Ginny Weasley, pointing at Potter and calling out his name like all the other students had while leaving, still starstruck by famous Harry Potter. He found himself sourer to see her than the rest, calling out, "There he is, Mum, there he is, look!" *Don't worry, little girl. Soon enough, you'll get your wish, and your precious savior will be all yours. The blue loop could never change past that.*

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them, though she had to be disconcerted to see Malfoy white-blond in their midst. "Busy year?" she said, and managed not to do a double-take at the green color of Potter's tie.

"Very," said Potter, while curling his hand over his tie and collar. "Thanks for the fudge and the jumper, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear."

"I- I lost a bet with Draco," Potter admitted to Mrs. Weasley and her daughter. It didn't shake the adoration of Ginny Weasley, who looked at him like all the stars shone out of his eyes.

"Ready, are you?"

And up came the most preposterous, purple-faced, moustache-wearing farce of a Muggle, scowling at Potter's owl of all things, if it wasn't one of the only decent possessions besides the broom and cloak that Potter owned. Behind him was a plain-faced Muggle woman and a wide-looking Muggle boy, who looked similarly unhappy to see Potter, though with more of a share of fear than derision on their homely faces.

Draco couldn't believe it. These were the famed Muggles who had raised Potter in the wild like a savage beast. It was like going to a zoo and seeing the prize exhibit.

"You must be Harry's family!" said Mrs. Weasley.

"In a manner of speaking," said the purple-faced one. "Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day."

Draco frowned, and before he could think better of it, inserted himself between the Muggle and Potter. "Are you speaking to this boy, or that round-faced blond simpleton over there? Because surely a Muggle would never dare to speak with such disrespect to *Harry Potter*."

"Draco, it's fine," Potter hissed, tugging at his sleeve and trying to disengage him.

"And who might you be, you poncy little git? A posh sort of freak, then, are you?" the Muggle sneered, and Draco knew then what he should have always suspected: Potter had seen his parents in the Mirror of Erised because he had never known kindness from the family he had.

"Oh, yes, a posh freak." Draco's smile bared his teeth. "One who *dislikes* to hear himself spoken ill of, let alone his friends. Shall we see if that Muggle tongue would be better utilized-"

"Draco, you can't curse him here!" Hermione hissed, grabbing at his hand before it could go into his pocket, while Ron and Harry flocked around them fearfully, and Draco didn't move his gaze from the Muggle's until he could see fear finally in those beady eyes.

"Well," Draco said, "It seems my friends are more merciful than I. You ought to thank your nephew with that uneducated tongue, for still *having* a tongue capable of *speech*." He tilted his chin up, hearing Severus's notes in his voice, and pretended he was a Dementor as he watched the light all drain from the Muggle's eyes. "Farewell, then. I do so hope to hear of an appropriately respectful treatment of Harry Potter. If not, rest assured that there are limits to the mercy of a Malfoy."

"Draco!" Potter snapped, and Draco rolled his eyes and stepped back from the Muggle. "You're *mad*," Potter hissed, and then reached out and touched Draco's hand for a solitary moment, before he followed the Muggles.

It was not quite before he finished saying his goodbyes to an amused Ron, exasperated Hermione, and the shell-shocked Weasley women, that Draco felt eyes in the back of his head. He made a point of not turning around, not hurrying his goodbyes, and hugging Hermione with a flick at the turquoise on her wrist, before turning to face his father.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, everyone! I've really enjoyed hearing all your thoughts and comments! I've gotten very invested in this alternate universe of mine, so it means the

world to me that other people are enjoying it too! ^^ I'll be posting the first chapter of book two of the series in two days, so please look forward to it :)

Works inspired by this one

Draco Malfoy and the Mirror of Ecidyrue by Emrys_Seren

Proper Guidance by StarfishSerpent

[ART] The Mirror of Ecidyrue by reliand

[Cover Art] Mirror Of Ecidyrue (All Seven Books) by metatronlives

Mind Reader by rapidlyobsessed

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